A SERVANT OF THE PUBLIC

ANTHONY HOPE

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"I SHALL BE YOUNG—YOUNG ENOUGH—FOR TEN YEARS MORE, AND WITH THE PROPER APPLIANCES, BEAUTIFUL FOR TWENTY."—*Page* 60.

A SERVANT *of the* PUBLIC

By ANTHONY HOPE

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CHAPTER I

MUDDOCK AND MEAD

THE social birth of a family, united by a chain of parallel events with the commercial development of a business, is a spectacle strange to no country but most common among the nation of shopkeepers; it presents, however, interesting points and is likely to produce a group of persons rather diverse in character. Some of the family breathe the new air readily enough; with some the straw of the omnibus (there was straw in omnibuses during the formative period) follows on silken skirts into the landau. It takes, they say, three generations to make a gentleman; the schools ticket them — National or Board, Commercial or Grammar, Eton or Harrow. Three generations, not perhaps of human flesh, but of mercantile growth, it takes to make a great Concern. The humble parent-tree in the Commercial Road puts forth branches in Brixton, Camberwell, Stoke Newington, wherever buyers are many and "turnover" quick: here is the second period, when the business is already large and lucrative, but not yet imposing. Then a new ambition stirs and works in the creator's mind; there is still a world to conquer. Appearance is added to reality, show to substance. A splendid block rises somewhere within the ken of fashion; it is red, with white facings, a tower or two,

perhaps a clock. First and last, a good deal is said about it in talk and in print. Possibly a luncheon is given. Now there are points of policy to be practised, not directly productive of hard money, but powerful in the long run. For example, the young ladies and gentlemen who serve the counters should be well treated, and carefully looked after in regard to their morals. And if this be done, there is no reason against having the fact stated with the utmost available publicity. For this service, sections of an all-embracing Press are ready and willing. In the eye of the polite world this big block is now the business: the branches are still profitable, but the ledgers alone sing their virtues; men cease to judge the position or the purse of the family by their humble fronts. For the family too has been on the move; it has passed, in orderly progression, in an ascent of gentility, from Putney to Maida Vale, from Maida Vale to Paddington, from Paddington to Kensington Palace Gardens. At each stopping-place it may acquire members, at some it will lose them; the graves where those lie who have dropped from the ranks are themselves milestones on the march. The survivors have each some scent, some trace, of their place of origin. To the architect of fortune the Commercial Road is native and familiar; he lost his first love there and buried her down East. His second wife dates from the latter end of the Maida Vale time and is in all essentials of the Middle, or Paddington, Period. The children recollect Paddington as childhood's home, have extorted information about Maida Vale, talk of Putney with a laugh, and seem almost of true Kensington Palace Gardens' blood. Yet even in them there is an element which they are hardly conscious of, an element not to be refined away till the third generation of human

flesh has run. Then comes the perfect product; a baronetcy is often supposed to mark, but sometimes may be considered to precede, its appearance. Indeed — for it is time to descend to the particular — Sir James Muddock was hardly the perfect product; nay, he still strove valiantly to plume himself on not being such. But with a wife and children it is hard to go on exulting in a lowly origin. It is also rather selfish, and was certainly so in Sir James' case, since Lady Muddock was very sensitive on the subject. It would seem that being of the Middle Period is apt to produce a sensitiveness of this sort; the pride of achievement is not there, the pride of position is still new and uneasy.

Somewhat in this vein, but with a more malicious and humorous turn of speech, Ashley Mead ran through the history of the firm of Muddock and Mead for Lady Kilnorton's pleasure and information. She was interested in them as phenomena and as neighbours; they were hardly more than across the road from her house in Queen's Gate. Ashley spoke with full knowledge; both business and family were familiar to him; he himself represented an episode in the career of the concern which survived only in its name. He used to say that he had just missed being a fit figure for romance; his father had not been a scatter-brained genius bought out of a splendid certainty of wealth for fifty pounds, but a lazy man who very contentedly and with open eyes accepted fifteen thousand pounds and leisure in preference to hard work and an off-chance of riches. This elder Mead had come into the business with three thousand pounds when capital was wanted for the Stoke Newington branch, and had gone out when ambition began to whisper the name of Buckingham Palace Road. He had not felt aggrieved at losing opulence, but had

lived on his spoil — after all, a good return for his investment — and died with it in cheerfulness. But then he had not been born a trader. He came of the professions; money-making was not in his blood nor bone of his bone, as it must be in the frame of one who is to grow gradually by his own labour to the status of a millionaire. The instinct of gain was not in his son either; Ashley laughed with unreserved good-nature as he said:

"If my father hadn't gone out, I should have had half the business, I suppose, instead of starving along on four hundred a year."

"You 've your profession," observed Lady Kilnorton, hardly seriously. "The Bar, you know."

"My profession?" he laughed, as he leant against the mantel-piece and looked down at her. "I 'm one of five thousand names on five hundred doors, if that 's a profession!"

"You might make it one," she suggested, but not as though the subject interested her or were likely to interest him. The little rebuke had all the perfunctoriness of duty and convention.

"The funny thing is," he went on, "that old Sir James would like to get me back now; he 's always hinting about it. Shall I go and sell the ribbons?"

"Why can't Mr. Robert sell the ribbons?"

"Well, in the family we don't think Bob very bright, you see."

"Oh! Alice is bright, though; at least she 's very clear-headed."

"More brains than any of them. And what did you think of My lady?"

"Of My lady?" Irene Kilnorton laughed a little, raised her brows a little, and paused before she said:

"Well, her hair 's too fluffy, isn't it? They don't beat her, do they? She looks rather like it."

"No, they don't beat her; but she 's not quite sure that she 's got the grand manner."

"Isn't she?" said Lady Kilnorton, laughing again.

"And then Sir James insists on referring to Putney, especially by way of acknowledging the goodness of God in family prayers. The servants are there, of course, and — you understand?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Mead. In such a case I shouldn't like it myself."

"Lady Muddock has no objection to being thankful privately, but she doesn't like it talked about."

"You go there a great deal?" she asked, with a glance at him.

"Yes, a good deal."

"And the girl — Alice — is very fond of you?"

"Not the least, I believe."

"Oh, you 're bound to say that! Would she go with — with selling the ribbons?" But she went on without waiting for an answer, perhaps because she had risked a snub. "I was received with immense *empressement*."

"You 're a bit of a swell, aren't you?"

"A poverty-stricken Irish widow! No, but I took some swells with me."

"Lord Bowdon, for instance?"

"Yes, Lord Bowdon. And a greater swell still — Miss Ora Pinsent."

A pause followed. Ashley looked over his hostess' head out of the window. Then Lady Kilnorton added, "Lord Bowdon drove Miss Pinsent to her house afterwards."

Another pause followed; each was wondering what the other's point of view might be.

"Fancy Ora Pinsent at the Muddocks'!" reflected Ashley presently. "She went to please you?"

"How do I know why she went? I don't suppose she knew herself."

"You 're great friends, though?"

"I admire and despise, love and most bitterly hate, Ora Pinsent," said Lady Kilnorton.

"All at once?" asked Ashley with a smile, and brows raised in protest.

"Yes, all at once, and successively, and alternately, and in all sorts of various combinations."

"And Lord Bowdon drove her home?" His tone begged for a comment from his companion.

"I told you so," she answered with a touch of irritation, which was as significant as any comment.

The servant came in, bringing tea; they were silent while the preparations were made. Ashley, however, covertly regarded his friend's trim figure and pretty, small features. He often felt rather surprised that he had no inclination to fall in love with, or even to make love to, Irene Kilnorton. Many men had such an inclination, he knew; among them he ranked this same Lord Bowdon who had driven Miss Pinsent to her house. Lady Kilnorton was young, she was pretty, she had, if not wit, at least the readiness of reply which is the common substitute provided by the habit of conversing with wideawake people. It was, though, very pleasant to have so charming a friend and to be in no danger of transforming her into the doubtful and dangerous character of a woman he loved; so he told himself, having no disposition to love her.

"She 's got a husband, hasn't she?" he asked, as the door closed behind the footman.

"Ora? Oh, yes, somewhere. He 's a scamp, I think.

He 's called — oh, I forget! But his name doesn't matter."

"They 've always got a husband, he 's always a scamp, and his name never matters," remarked Ashley between mouthfuls of toast.

"Fenning! That 's it! Fenning."

"Just as you like, Lady Kilnorton. It 's the fact, not what you call it, that 's the thing, you know."

As he spoke the door was opened again and Lord Bowdon was announced. He came in almost eagerly, like a man who has something to say, shook hands hastily, and, the instant that he dropped into a chair, exclaimed, "What a glorious creature!"

"I knew exactly what you were going to say before you opened your lips," remarked Lady Kilnorton. "You haven't been long, though." There was a touch of malice in her tone.

"It wasn't left to me to fix the length of the interview. And she said she liked driving fast. Well, Ashley, my boy, how are you?"

"I 'm all right, Lord Bowdon."

"I 've got a job for you. I 'll write to you about it presently. It 's a Commission they 've put me on, and I thought you might like to be secretary."

"Anything with a stipend," agreed Ashley cheerfully.

"What a lot men think of money!" said Lady Kilnorton.

"I don't think I ever met a more fascinating creature," Lord Bowdon mused.

"It 's awfully good of you," continued Ashley. "I 'm uncommonly hard-up just now."

"Do you know her?" asked Bowdon.

"Met her once or twice," Ashley answered very care-

lessly. Bowdon seemed to fall into a reverie, as he gently stirred his tea round and round. Lady Kilnorton leant back and looked at the mantel-piece. But presently he glanced at her, smiled pleasantly, and began to discuss the Muddocks. Ashley left them thus engaged when he took his leave ten minutes later.

Lord Bowdon had lived a full and active life which now stretched over forty-three years. In spite of much sport and amusement he had found time for some soldiering, for the duties of his station, and for proving himself an unexpectedly useful and sensible Member of Parliament. But he had not found time to be married; that event he used to think of in his earlier days as somehow connected with his father's death; when he became Earl of Daresbury, he would marry. However, about a year back, he had made Lady Kilnorton's acquaintance, had liked her, and had begun to draw lazy and leisurely plans about her. He had not fallen in love with her, any more than Ashley Mead had, but he had drifted into a considerable affection for her. His father had lived to be old; he himself had already grown more middle-aged than was desirable in a bridegroom. During the last few weeks he had considered the project seriously; and that he had assumed this attitude of mind could hardly have escaped the lady's notice. He had detected, with some pleasure, her hidden consciousness of his purpose and commended her for a gracefully easy treatment of the position. She did not make at him, nor yet run away from him, she neither hurried nor repulsed him. Thus by degrees the thing had become very pleasant and satisfactory in imagination. It was not quite what in by-gone years he had meant by being in love — he thanked heaven for that, after reflection — but it was pleasant and satisfactory. "Let it go on to

the end," he would have said, with a contentment hardly conscious of an element of resignation.

To-day there was a check, a set-back in his thoughts, and he was uncomfortable lest it might shew in his manner. He talked too long about the Muddocks, then too long about Ashley Mead, then about something quite uninteresting. There was an unexplained check; it vexed and puzzled him. Lady Kilnorton, with her usual directness, told him what it was before they parted.

"You 've been thinking about Ora Pinsent all the time," she said. "It would have been better to have the courage of your ingratitude and go on talking about her." The gay, good-humoured words were accompanied by a rather nervous little smile.

"Who is she?" asked Bowdon bluntly and with undisguised curiosity.

"She 's Mrs. Jack Fenning. I don't know and I don't care who Jack Fenning is, only —"

"Only what?"

"Only he 's not dead. I know you think that 's the one thing he ought to be."

"I 'm not sure about that," he answered, looking in her face. The face had suddenly become charming to him in its now apparent mixture of annoyance and merriment. "Well, I must be going," he added with a sigh. Then he laughed; Lady Kilnorton, after an instant's hesitation, joined in his laugh.

"She liked me to drive as fast as I could, and straight home!" said he. "Good-bye, Lady Kilnorton."

"Good-bye. I wonder you aren't a little more sensible at your age."

"She carries you off your feet, somehow," he murmured apologetically, as he made for the door. He was feeling both rude and foolish, confessing thereby

the special relation towards his hostess which he had come to occupy.

Left alone, Irene Kilnorton sat down and attempted a dispassionate appraisement of herself. She was twenty-nine, a widow of four years' standing. The world, which had seemed ended when her young husband died, had revived for her; such is the world's persistent way. She was pretty, not beautiful, bright, not brilliant, pleasant, but hardly fascinating. She was pleased with the impartiality which conducted her so far. But at this point the judgment of herself began to drift into a judgment of Ora Pinsent, who seemed to be all that she herself had just missed being; in assessing Ora the negatives fell out and the limitations had to be discarded. Yet her mood was not one of envy for Ora Pinsent. She would not be Ora Pinsent. Among those various feelings which she had for Ora, there was one which she had described by saying "I despise her." The mood, in truth, hung doubtful between pity and contempt; but it was enough to save her from wishing to be Ora Pinsent. She would sooner put up with the negatives and the limitations. But she might wish, and did wish, that other people could take her own discerning view of her friend. She did not call herself a jealous woman; but after all Lord Bowdon had become in a rather special sense her property; now he was, as he put it graphically enough, carried off his feet. That condition would not last; he would find his feet and his feet would find the ground again soon. Meanwhile, however, she could hardly be expected exactly to like it. Men did such strange things — or so she had been told — just in those brief spaces of time when the feet were off the ground; perhaps women too did things rather strange in a similar case.

"And poor Ora's feet," she said to herself, "are never really on the ground."

She was vaguely conscious that her mingled admiration and contempt reflected in a rather commonplace fashion the habitual attitude of good-sense towards genius. Not being in love with commonplace good-sense as an intellectual ideal, she grew impatient with her thoughts, flung the window open, and sought distraction in the sight of the people who passed up and down the hill through the cool kindliness of the June evening. The wayfarers caught her idle interest, and she had almost lost herself in wondering whether the boy and girl at the corner would kiss before they parted when she was recalled to her own sphere by seeing two people whom she knew breasting the slope on bicycles. A dark young man inclining to stoutness, very elaborately arrayed for the exercise on which he was engaged, rode side by side with a dark young woman inclining to leanness, plainly clad, with a face that a man might learn to think attractive by much looking, but would not give a second thought to in a London drawing-room. "The young Muddocks," said Irene, drawing back and peering at them from behind her curtains. "Recovering themselves after the party, I suppose."

She watched them till they were out of sight; why, she did not ask herself. Of course there was the interest of wealth, perhaps a vulgar, but seemingly an unavoidable, sensation which pounds much multiplied enable their possessors to create. There was more; the Muddocks had come somehow into her orbit. They were in the orbit of her friend Ashley Mead; the girl might become the most important satellite there. Irene's own act had perhaps brought them into Ora Pinsent's orbit — where storms were apt to rage. Curiosity mingled with an

absurd sense of responsibility in her. "It 's such a risk introducing Ora to anybody," she murmured, and with this her thoughts flew back to Bowdon and the condition of men who are carried off their feet.

"It 's simply that I 'm jealous," she declared petulantly, as she shut the window. But she was not yet to escape from Ora Pinsent. There on the mantel-piece was a full-length photograph, representing Ora in her latest part and signed with her autograph, a big O followed by a short sprawl of letters, and a big P followed by a longer sprawl. Though not a professed believer in the revelation of character by handwriting, Irene found something significant in this signature, in the impulse which seemed to die away to a fatigued perfunctory ending, in the bold beginning that lagged on to a conclusion already wearisome. Her eyes rose to the face of the portrait. It shewed a woman in a mood of audacity, still merry and triumphant, but distantly apprehensive of some new and yet unrealised danger. Exultation, barely yet most surely touched with fear, filled the eyes and shaped the smile. It seemed to Irene Kilnorton that, if Ora knew herself and her own temper, such reasonably might be her disposition towards the world and her own life as well as her pose in the play to which she now drew all the town; for her power of enjoying greatly in all likelihood carried with it its old companion, the power greatly to suffer. Yet to Irene a sort of triviality affected both capacities, as though neither could be exactly taken seriously, as though the enjoyment would always be childish, the suffering none too genuine. Good-sense judged genius again; and again the possessor of good-sense turned impatiently away, not knowing whether her contempt should be for herself or for her friend.

Then she began to laugh, suddenly but heartily, at the recollection of Lady Muddock. When Ora had passed on after the introduction, and Irene was lingering in talk with her hostess, Lady Muddock had raised her timid pale-blue eyes, nervously fingered that growth of hair which was too fluffy for her years, and asked whether Miss Pinsent were "nice." This adjective, maid-of-all-work on women's lips, had come with such ludicrous inadequacy and pitiful inappropriateness that even at the moment Irene had smiled. Now she laughed. Yet she was aware that Lady Muddock had no more than this one epithet with which to achieve a classification of humanity. You were nice or you were not nice; it was simple dichotomy; there was the beginning, there the end of the matter. So viewed, the question lost its artlessness and became a singularly difficult and searching interrogation. For if the little adjective were given its rich fulness of meaning, its widely representative character (it had to sum up half a world!), if it were asked whether, on the whole, Ora Pinsent were likely to be a good element in the world, or (if it might be so put) a profitable speculation on the part of Nature, Irene Kilnorton would have been quite at a loss to answer. In fact — she asked, with a laugh still but now a puzzled laugh — was she nice or wasn't she? The mixture of feelings which she had described to Ashley Mead forbade any clear and definite response on her own behalf. On Lady Muddock's, however, she owned that the verdict must be in the negative. By the Muddock standards, nice Ora was not.

And what was this absent Jack Fenning like? There seemed no materials for a judgment, except that he had married Ora Pinsent and was no longer with Ora

Pinsent. Here was a combination of facts about him remarkable enough to invest him with a certain interest. The rest was blank ignorance.

"And," said Irene with another slight laugh, "I suppose I'm the only person who ever took the trouble to think about him. I'm sure Ora never does!"

CHAPTER II

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

IT was an indication of the changed character of the business that the big block in Buckingham Palace Road closed early on Saturdays, surrendering the hours in which the branches continued to do their most roaring trade. The day after the party was a Saturday; Sir James and his son were making their way back through the Park, timed to arrive at home for a two o'clock luncheon. The custom was that Lady Muddock and Alice should meet them at or about the entrance of Kensington Gardens, and the four walk together to the house. There existed in the family close union, modified by special adorations. Sir James walked with his daughter, Bob with his stepmother; this order never varied, being the natural outcome of the old man's clinging to Alice, and of Lady Muddock's pathetic fidelity to Bob. She had no child of her own; she looked up to Alice, but was conscious of an almost cruel clear-sightedness in her which made demonstrations of affection seem like the proffer of excuses. There are people so sensible that one caresses them with an apology. Bob, on the other hand, was easy to please; you had to look after his tastes, admire his wardrobe, and not bother about the business out of hours; he asked no more, his stepmother did no less. Thus while they crossed the Gar-

dens Lady Muddock talked of yesterday's party, while Sir James consulted his daughter as to the affairs of the firm. Alice detected here and there in what he said an undercurrent of discontent with Bob, on the score of a lack not of diligence but of power, not of the willingness to buckle to, but of that instinct for the true game — the right move, the best purchase, the moment to stand for your price, the moment to throw all on the market — whence spring riches. Sir James expressed his meaning clumsily, but he ended clearly enough by wishing that there were another head in the business; for he grew old, and, although he was now relieved from Parliament, found the work heavy on him. Nothing of all this was new to the listener; the tale was an old one and led always to the same climax, the desire to get Ashley Mead back into the business. If Alice objected that he was ignorant and untrained in commercial pursuits, Sir James pushed the difficulty aside. "He 's got the stuff in him," he would persist, and then look at his daughter in a questioning way. With this look also she was familiar; the question which the glance put was whether she would be willing to do what Lady Kilnorton called "going with selling the ribbons."

Such was the suggestion; Alice's mood (she treated herself with the candour which she bestowed on others) towards it was that she would be willing to go — to go to Ashley Mead, but not to go with selling the ribbons. The point was not one of pride; it was partly that she seemed to herself to be weary of the ribbons, not ashamed (she was free from that little weakness, which beset Bob and made him sensitive to jokes about his waistcoats being acquired at cost price), but secretly and rather urgently desirous of a new setting and back-

ground for her life, and of an escape from surroundings grown too habitual. But it was more perhaps that she did not wish Ashley to sell ribbons or to make money. She was touched with a culture of which Sir James did not dream; the culture was in danger of producing fastidiousness. Ashley was precious in her life because he did not sell ribbons, because he thought nothing or too little of money, because he was poor. The children of the amassers are often squanderers. Alice was no squanderer, but she felt that enough money had been made, enough ribbons sold. With a new aim and a new outlook life would turn sweet again. And she hated the thought that to Ashley she meant ribbons. She did not fear that he would make love to her merely for her money's sake; but the money would chink in her pocket and the ribbons festoon about her gown; if she went to him, she would like to leave all that behind and start a new existence. Yet the instinct in her made the business sacred; a reverence of habit hung about it, causing these dreams to seem unholy rebels which must not shew their heads, and certainly could not be mentioned in answer to her father's look. Moreover she wished Ashley to shew himself a man who, if he took to ribbon-selling, would sell ribbons well; the qualities remained great in her eyes though the pursuit had lost its charms.

At lunch they talked of their guests. Lady Kilnorton had pleased them all; Lord Bowdon's presence was flattering to Lady Muddock and seemed very friendly to her husband. Minna Soames, who had come to sing to the party, was declared charming: hard if she had not been, since she spent her life trying after that verdict! Lady Muddock added that she was very nice, and sang only at concerts because of the atmosphere of the stage. Ora Pinsent excited more discussion and difference of

opinion, but here also there was a solid foundation of agreement. They had all felt the gulf between them and her; she might not be bad — Bob pretended that he would have heard all about any scandal had there been one — but she was hopelessly alien from them. They were not sorry that Lady Kilnorton had brought her, for she had added to the *éclat*, but they could not feel sure (nor perhaps eager to be sure) that they had secured a permanent acquaintance, much less a possible friend. And then she had told her hostess, quite casually, that Lord Bowdon (whom she had never met before) was going to drive her home. Lord Bowdon was not an old man, Miss Pinsent was quite a young woman; he was a lord and she was an actress; of suspected classes, both of them. Every tenet and preconception of the Middle Period combined to raise grave apprehension in Lady Muddock's mind. Sir James nodded assent over his rice pudding. The son and daughter shared the feeling, but with self-questioning; was it not narrow, asked Alice, was it not unbecoming to a man of the world, asked Bob. But there it was — in brother and sister both.

"Ashley knows her, I think," Alice remarked.

"That doesn't prove anything," said Bob with a laugh. Lady Muddock looked a little frightened. "I mean, Ashley knows everybody," he added rather enviously.

"Ashley can take care of himself," the old man decided, as he pushed his plate away.

"Anyhow I don't suppose we shall see much of her," said Alice. Her tone had some regret in it; Ora Pinsent was at least far removed from the making of money and the selling of ribbons; she was of another world.

With this the subject passed; nobody made mention

of Mr. Jack Fenning because nobody (not even well-informed Bob) had heard of him, and gloves had hidden the unobtrusive wedding ring on Miss Pinsent's finger. Indeed at all times it lay in the shadow of a very fine sapphire; the fanciful might be pardoned for finding an allegory here.

The still recent fatigues of entertaining made Lady Muddock disinclined to drive, and Alice went alone to the Park in the afternoon. The place was very full, and motion slow and interrupted. Getting fast-set in a block, she leant back resignedly, wondering why in the world she had chosen this mode of spending a summer afternoon. Suddenly she heard her name called and, turning round, found a small and unpretentious victoria wedged close to the carriage. A lady sat in the victoria; Alice was conscious of little more than a large hat, eyes, and a smile; when she thought of the meeting later on, she was surprised to find herself ignorant of what Ora Pinsent was wearing. But the smile she remembered; it was so cordial and radiant, a smile quite without reserve, seeming to express what was, for the instant at least, the whole and unclouded happiness of a human being. Thus to smile is in itself a talent.

"Miss Pinsent!" she exclaimed in a flutter for which she had not time to rebuke herself.

"I wasn't quite sure it was you," Ora explained. "But I thought I'd risk it. Isn't it dull?" Her eloquent hands accused the whole surroundings.

"This block's so tiresome," observed Alice; she felt the obviousness of the remark.

"Oh, I don't mind whether we move or not. I mean driving alone. But perhaps you do it from choice. I don't. But he didn't come."

Alice looked at her and laughed.

"I should have thought he would," she said. She began to be amused.

"Yes, wouldn't you?" asked Ora. "But he didn't."

"I 'm very sorry."

"Oh, I've stopped wanting him now. It 's quite unsafe not to keep appointments with me. You miss the time when you 're wanted! Have you seen Irene Kilnorton anywhere?"

"Not since yesterday."

There was a pause. Some way ahead a carriage crawled a few paces on; the pack was going to break up. Ora's victoria got a start first; as it moved she turned her head over her shoulder, saying:

"I suppose you wouldn't like to come and see me some day?"

Alice said that she would be delighted, but she felt that her expression of pleasure in the prospect sounded purely conventional. In reality she was amazed, inclined to be apprehensively gratified, and certainly interested.

"Then do," smiled Miss Pinsent as she was borne away.

"I wonder who didn't come!" said Alice to herself, smiling; but the next moment criticism revived. "How curious she should tell me about it!" she reflected. "She doesn't know me a bit." Frown and smile stood on her face together.

The way was cleared. Alice accomplished another round at a fairly quick trot. Then she saw Miss Pinsent's victoria again. This time Miss Pinsent was not alone; the victoria stood by the path and Lord Bowdon's foot was on the step. He was talking to Ora; Ora leant back, looking past him with an expression of utter inattention. Was he the man who didn't come? Or was

she inattentive because he was not? Alice gave up the riddle; she had a sudden consciousness that generalisations which had hitherto seemed tolerably trustworthy might prove most fallacious if applied to Ora Pinsent. But there was a distinct regret in her mind when she lost sight of the little victoria with the big man by its step. She had her invitation; but in retrospect her invitation seemed woefully vague.

Ashley dropped in to dinner that evening, pleasant and talkative as usual, but rather less alert and a trifle absent in manner. However he had good news; he was to be secretary to Lord Bowdon's Commission; it would last a long while, was probably meant to last as long as the Government did (the grounds for this impression would be tedious to relate, and open to controversy), and would enable him to pay bills.

"I suppose," he said to Alice, "you don't know what it is not to be able to pay a bill?"

"I hardly ever have one," she said; "they're just sent in to father."

"It must be rather slow never to be hard-up," he remarked; he hardly meant what he said, and was quite unaware how true his remark seemed to Alice Muddock. "Then you never write cheques?" he went on.

"For charity I do."

"Good heavens, what a base use of a cheque book!"

Lady Muddock happened to hear this observation. She had failed to accustom herself to remarks not meant for literal acceptance; the Middle Period treats language seriously.

"We all ought to give a certain proportion," she remarked. "Oughtn't we, James?" But Sir James had gone to sleep.

As Ashley sat and talked lightly about the secretaryship, his shifts to live comfortably beyond his means, and the welcome help Lord Bowdon had afforded, Alice felt a surprise at him growing in her. Had she been placed as he was, she might not have married for money, but she would inevitably have thought of such a step, probably have had a severe struggle about it, and certainly have enjoyed a sense of victory in putting it on one side. The money-taint had bitten so far into her; she could disregard wealth but could not forget it. She hardly understood Ashley; she felt curious to know what he would say if she stood before him and offered herself and her thousands freely, unconditionally, the money without the ribbons. Did he know that she was ready to do it? Did he want her? There was an only half-occupied look in his eyes. She never expected to see admiration gleam in the eyes of men, but she often, indeed generally, excited interest and chained attention. To-night there was hardly attention, certainly not whole-hearted engrossed interest. All at once, for the first time in her simple sincere life, there came over her a bitter regret that she was not pretty. It was a small thing to be; small in itself, very small in the little changes of shape and colour that made it. But how rich in consequences! Yes, she meditated, how unfairly rich!

Pressed by thought, she found herself lapsing into long silences. She started another line of talk, but the new topic sprang from the previous meditation.

"I met Miss Pinsent in the Park to-day," she said. "She was looking so beautiful. And what do you think, she asked me to go and see her! I was very flattered."

Ashley smiled as he observed:

"She's asked me to go and see her too."

"Shall you go?" asked Alice, with a grave interest.

She was puzzled at the heartiness of his laugh over her question.

"Great heavens, of course I shall go," he said, laughing still.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Why, my dear Alice, there isn't a man in London who wouldn't go."

"Oh, I see," she said in a disappointed, almost irritable tone. She had somehow expected a better explanation than lay in that, something that might apply to herself, to a girl. She was even sure that there ought to be something more about Miss Pinsent, that it was a man's fault if he saw only what all men must see. Her tone did not escape the quick wit of her companion.

"You must see that she's tremendously interesting?" he said. "Lady Kilnorton says that Ora Pinsent's the most interesting person in the world — except one."

"Except who?"

"Her husband," he answered, laughing again. "You look surprised. Oh, yes, he exists. His name's Fenning."

"She — she's married?" Alice was leaning forward now; here was another problem.

"Incredible, but true. You may let Bob meet her without the least danger of spoiling that great match he's going to make."

"I'd no idea she was married."

Ashley was obviously amused at her wonder, perhaps at the importance she attached to the circumstance which he had brought to her knowledge.

"Lady Kilnorton will have it that he must be a remarkable man," he went on. "But it doesn't follow in

the least, you know, rather the contrary. Some women have unimpeachable taste in everything except marriage; or perhaps we must all have our share of the ordinary, and they take theirs out in their husbands. Anyhow, he 's at the other end of the world somewhere."

They talked a little while longer about Ora, Alice incidentally mentioning Bowdon's appearance by the step of the victoria. Then Ashley said good-night, and started to walk home to his rooms in one of the streets which run down from the Strand to the Thames Embankment. Here he dwelt humbly, commanding modest comforts and, if he craned his neck, a sidelong view of a bit of the river by Charing Cross bridge. As he walked, he was pleasantly and discursively thoughtful. His evening had disposed him to reflexion on the very various types of people who inhabited the world and flocked, one and all, to London. He knew many sorts; yet within the limits of his acquaintance the Muddocks were peculiar. And now, right at the other end of the scale, came this Miss Pinsent. He thought about Miss Pinsent for a little while, and then drifted idly into a trivial classification of women according to their external advantages. Perhaps he had dimly discerned and caught something of Alice Muddock's train of ideas. There were those beautiful to all, those pretty to some, those plain to most. Miss Pinsent, Lady Kilnorton, Alice Muddock, were the instances on which his generalities depended. Superficial as the dividing principle was, he gained a hint of what had come home to Alice while he talked to her, of the immense difference it made to the persons divided. (That it made an immense difference to him was in no way such a discovery as needed midnight meditation.) To them the difference would surely become more than a source of greater or less

homage, attention, pleasure, or excitement. These immediate results must so influence and affect life as to make the woman in the end really a different being, a different inner as well as a different outer creature, from what she would have been had she occupied a place in another class than her own. It would be curious to take twin souls (he allowed himself the hypothesis of souls), put them into diverse kinds of bodies, leave them there ten years, from eighteen to twenty-eight, say, then take them out and record the observed variations. But that was hopeless; the experimental method, admirable for all sorts of dull subjects, broke down just where it would become of absorbing interest.

In Pall Mall he met Lord Bowdon coming out of the Reform Club. Bowdon's family had always been Whigs; people might argue that historical parties had changed their policies and their principles; Bowdon was not to be caught by any such specious reasoning. The Liberals were heirs to the Whigs; he was heir to his fathers; his conservative temperament preserved his Liberal principles. But he did not seem to be occupied by such matters to-night. He caught Ashley by the arm, turned him round the Athenæum corner, and began to stroll gently along towards the steps. Ashley thanked him again for procuring him the Secretaryship; Bowdon's only answer was to nod absently. What Alice Muddock had told him recurred to Ashley's mind.

"I hear you had an audience in the Park to-day," he said, laughing. "Her Majesty distinguished you?"

"I did a most curious thing," said Bowdon slowly. "I had an appointment to drive with her. I didn't go. Half-an-hour later I walked up to the Park and looked for her till I found her. Doesn't that strike you as a very silly proceeding?"

"Very," said Ashley with a laugh.

"In a man of forty-three?" pursued Bowdon with a whimsical gravity.

"Worse and worse. But where do you put the folly, in missing the appointment or — ?"

"Oh, in the combination! The combination makes it hopeless. You said you knew her, didn't you?"

"Yes. I shouldn't miss the appointment."

Ashley had long been aware of his companion's kindness for him, one of those partialities that arise without much apparent reason but are of unquestionable genuineness. But Bowdon was considered reserved, and this little outbreak of self-exposure was a surprise. It shewed that the man was at least playing with a new emotion; if the emotion grew strong the play might turn to earnest. Moreover Bowdon must know that his confidant was a frequent visitor at Lady Kilnorton's. Bowdon stopped suddenly, standing still on the pavement, and looking full in Ashley's face.

"Don't think I'm going to make a fool of myself, my boy," he said with remarkable emphasis and energy. "Good-night;" and, hailing a cab, he was off in an instant.

Ashley properly considered his friend's last remark an indication that he was feeling rather inclined to, and just possibly might, make or try to make (for often failure is salvation) a fool of himself. The man of unshaken sobriety of purpose needs no such protests. Ashley strolled on to his rooms, decidedly amused, somehow also a little vexed. Nothing had happened except a further and needless proof that he had been right in putting Ora in the first division of his classification. The vexation, then, remained unaccounted for, and it was not until he had reached home, lit

his pipe, mixed his whiskey and water, and settled in his arm-chair, that he discovered that he was a little annoyed just because Lord Bowdon was apparently afraid of making a fool of himself. It was a thing that Bowdon or any other man had a perfect right to do, so far as the rest of the world was concerned. This sounded like a platitude; Ashley was surprised to find in his own soul an indefinite but not weak opposition to it. The instinct of exclusive possession was stirring in him, that resentment of intrusion which is the forerunner of a claim to property. Well, he was not forty-three but just thirty. His theory of life did not forbid a certain amount of making a fool of himself; his practice had included a rather larger quantity. Perturbation had been the ruling factor in Bowdon, in Ashley a pleasurable anticipation was predominant. In his case there were no very obvious reasons why he should not make a fool of himself again, if he were so disposed; for, dealing dispassionately with the situation and with his own standards, he could not treat this Jack Fenning as a very obvious reason. He went to bed with a vague sense of satisfaction; the last few days had brought to birth a new element in life, or at least a new feature of this season. It was altogether too soon to set about measuring the dimensions of the fresh arrival or settling to what it might or might not grow.

His anticipation would have been much heightened and the development of his interest quickened had he been able to see what was at this time happening to the lady who had made so abrupt and resolute an entry into his thoughts as well as into Lord Bowdon's. Her distress would have been sun and water to the growth of his feelings. For Mr. Sidney Hazlewood, an accomplished comedian and Ora Pinsent's Manager, had urged that

she should try, and indeed must force herself, to regard a certain business arrangement from a purely business point of view. To Ora, still charged with the emotions of her performance in addition to her own natural and large stock of emotions, this suggestion seemed mere brutality, oblivious of humanity, and dictated solely by a ruthless and unhallowed pursuit of gain. So she burst into tears, and a weary wrinkle knitted itself on Mr. Hazlewood's brow. Lady Kilnorton had been blaming herself for judging genius from the stand of common-sense; Mr. Hazlewood did not theorise about the matter; that eloquent wrinkle was his sole protest against the existence and the ways of genius. The wrinkle having failed of effect, he observed that an agreement was an agreement and spoke, as a man who contemplates regrettable necessities, of his solicitor. Ora defied Mr. Hazlewood, the law, and the world, and went home still in tears. She was not really happy again until she had got into her dressing-gown, when quite suddenly she chanced on the idea that Mr. Hazlewood had a good deal to say for himself. Then she began to laugh merrily at the scene which had passed between them.

"He 's very stupid, but he likes me and he 's a good old creature," she ended in a charitable way.

CHAPTER III

AN ARRANGEMENT FOR SUNDAY

"ELIZABETH Aurora Pinsent; that's it. But Elizabeth was too solemn, and Betty was too familiar, and Aurora too absurd. So I'm just Ora."

Lord Bowdon nodded gravely.

"And I think," she went on, lying back on the sofa, "that the world's rather dull, and that you're rather like the world this afternoon."

He did not dispute the point. A man who wants to make love, but is withheld by the sense that he ought not, is at his dullest. Bowdon's state was this or even worse. Ora was a friend of Irene Kilnorton's; how much had she guessed, observed, or been told? Would she think loyalty a duty in herself and disloyalty in him a reproach? That would almost certainly be her mood unless she liked him very much; and she gave no sign of such a liking. On all grounds he was clear that he had better go away at once and not come back again. He thought first of Irene Kilnorton, then of his own peace and interest, lastly of Mr. Jack Fenning; but it must be stated to his credit that he did think quite perceptibly of Jack Fenning. Yet he did not go away immediately.

"You live all alone here?" he asked, looking round the bright little room.

"Yes, I can, you see. That's the advantage of being married."

"I never looked at marriage in that light before."

"No," she laughed. "You've not looked at it in any light, you know; only from the outer darkness."

As his eyes rested on her lying there in graceful repose, he felt a grudge against the way fate was treating him. He wished he were ten or fifteen years younger; he wished he had nothing to lose; he wished he had no conscience. Given these desirable things, he believed that he could break down this indifference and banish this repose. Ora had done nothing to create such a belief; it grew out of his own sturdy and usually justifiable self-confidence.

"Have you a conscience?" he asked her suddenly.

"Oh, yes," she answered, "afterwards."

"That's a harmless variety," he said wistfully.

"Tiresome, though," she murmured with her eyes upturned to the ceiling as though she had forgotten his presence. "Only, you see, something else happens soon and then you don't think any more about it." Ora seemed glad that the cold wind of morality was thus tempered.

Such a remedy was not for the solid-minded man: he did think more about it, notwithstanding that many things happened; and his was not merely the harmless variety of conscience. Ora nestled lower on her cushions, sighed and closed her eyes; she did not treat him with ceremony, if any comfort lay in that. He rose, walked to the window, and looked out. He felt intolerably absurd, but the perception of his absurdity did not help him much. Again he complained of fate. This thing had come just when such things should cease to come, just also when another thing had begun to seem so pleasant, so satisfactory, so almost settled. He was ashamed of himself; as he stood there

he regretted his midnight confidence to Ashley Mead a fortnight before. Since then he had made no confidences to Ashley; he had not told him how often he came to this house, nor how often he wished to come. Ora Pinsent's name had not been mentioned between them, although they had met several times over the initial business of launching their Commission.

He turned round and found her eyes on him. She began to laugh, sprang up, ran across the room, laid a hand lightly on his sleeve, and looked in his face, shaking her head with an air of determination.

"You must either go, or be a little more amusing," she said. "What 's the matter? Oh, I know! You 're in love!"

"I suppose so," he admitted with a grim smile.

"Not with me, though!"

"You 're sure of that? Nothing would make you doubt it?"

"Well, I thought it was Irene Kilnorton," she answered; her eyes expressed interest and a little surprise.

"So it was; at least I thought so too," said Bowdon.

"Well, if you think so enough, it 's all right," said Ora with a laugh.

"But I 'm inclined to think differently now."

"Oh, I shouldn't think differently, if I were you," she murmured. "Irene 's so charming and clever. She 'd just suit you."

"You 're absolutely right," said Bowdon.

"Then why don't you?" She looked at him for a moment and he met her gaze; a slight tint of colour came on her cheeks, and her lips curved in amusement. "Oh, what nonsense!" she cried a moment later and drew back from him till she leant against the opposite

shutter and stood there, smiling at him. The next moment she went on: "It is quite nonsense, you know."

Lord Bowdon thought for a moment before he answered her.

"Nonsense is not the same as nothing," he said at last.

"You're not serious about it?" she asked with a passing appearance of alarm. "But of course you aren't." She began to laugh again.

He was relieved to find that he had betrayed nothing more decisive than an inclination to flirt. It would be an excellent thing to sail off under cover of that; she would not be offended, he would be safe.

"Tragically serious," he answered, smiling.

"Oh, yes, I know!" she said. Then she grew grave, frowned a little and looked down into the street. "You talk rather like Jack used to. You reminded me of him for an instant," she remarked. "Though you're not like him really, of course."

"Your husband?" His tone had surprise in it; she had never mentioned Jack before; both the moment and the manner of her present reference to him seemed strange.

"Yes. You never met him, did you? He used to be about London five or six years ago."

"No, I never saw him. Where is he now?"

A shrug of her shoulders and a slight smile gave her answer.

"Why did he go away?"

"Oh, a thousand reasons! It doesn't matter. I liked him, though, once."

"Do you like him now?"

A moment more of gravity was followed by a sudden

smile; her eyes sparkled again and she laughed, as she answered,

"No, not just now, thank you, Lord Bowdon. What queer questions you ask, don't you?"

"The answers interest me."

"I don't see why they should."

"Don't you?"

"I mean I don't see how they ought."

"Quite so."

"You 're really getting a little bit more amusing," said Ora with a grateful look.

He felt an impulse to be brutal with her, to do, in another sphere of action, very much what Mr. Hazlewood had done when he insisted that a business arrangement must be regarded in a business-like way. Suppose he told her that questions of morals, with their cognate problems, ought to be regarded in a moral way? He would perhaps be a strange preacher, but surely she would forget that in amazement at the novelty of his doctrine!

"How old are you?" he asked her, aghast this time at his question but quite unable to resist it.

She glanced at him for a moment, smiled, and answered simply,

"Twenty-seven last December."

He was remorseful at having extracted an answer, but he bowed to her as he said,

"You 've paid me a high compliment. You 're right, though; it wasn't impertinence."

"Oh, no, you 're all right in that way," she murmured with a careless cordiality. "But why did you want to know?"

"I want to know all about you," he said in a low voice.

Again she looked at him for a moment, growing grave as she looked. Then she laid her hand on his arm again and looked up in his face with a pleading coaxing smile.

"Don't," she said.

There was silence for a moment. Then Lord Bowdon took her hand, kissed it, smiled at her, and asked a prosaic question.

"Where's my hat?" said he.

But that prosaic question made it impossible to sail off under cover of an inclination to flirt; it was not at all in that manner; it lacked the colour, the flourish and the show. As he walked away, Bowdon was conscious that whatever happened to the affair, good or evil, whether it went on or stopped, it must be stamped with a certain genuineness. It could not pass at once from his thoughts; he could not suppose that it would be dismissed immediately from hers.

That he occupied her attention for a little while after he went away happened to be the case, although it was by no means the certain result he imagined. A mind for the moment vacant of new impressions allowed her to wonder, rather idly, why she had said "Don't" so soon; he had done nothing to elicit so direct a prohibition; it had put a stop to a conversation only just becoming interesting, still far from threatening inconvenience. Perhaps she was surprised to find her injunction so effective. She had said the word, she supposed, because she was not much taken with him; or rather because she liked him very definitely in one way, and very definitely not in another, and so had been impelled to deal fairly with him. Besides he had for a moment reminded her of Jack Fenning; that also might have something to do with it. The remembrance of her

husband's love-making was not pleasant to her. It recalled the greatest of all the blunders into which her trick of sudden likings had led her, the one apparently irrevocable blunder. It brought back also the memory of old delusions which had made the blunder seem something so very different at the time it was committed. She walked about the room for a few minutes with a doleful look, her lips dragged down and her eyes woeful. It was only five; she did not dine till six. She was supposed to rest this hour; if resting meant thinking of Jack Fenning and Lord Bowdon and of the general harshness of the world, she would have none of it. It occurred to her, almost as an insult, that here was an hour in which she was at leisure and yet nobody seemed to desire her society; such treatment was strange and uncomplimentary.

A ring at the bell scattered her gloom.

"That must be somebody amusing!" she cried, clasping her hands in the joyful confidence that fate had taken a turn. "I wonder who it is!"

The visitor thus favoured by a prejudice of approbation proved to be Ashley Mead. He had come once before, a week ago; three days back Ora had in her own mind accused him of neglect and then charitably congratulated him on indifference. Now she ran to him as though he were the one person in the world she wished to see.

"How charming of you!" she cried. "I was bored to death. I do like people who come at the right time!"

Ashley held her hand for a moment in sheer pleasure at the feel of it; they sat down, she again on her sofa, he in a low chair close by.

"Tea?" she said.

"Goodness, no. Don't move from where you are, Miss Pinsent. I met Lord Bowdon walking away."

"I sent him away."

"What delightful presentiments you have!"

"Indeed I'd no idea that you'd come. I don't think he wanted to stay, though." She smiled meditatively. Lord Bowdon's prompt acceptance of her "Don't" seemed now to take on a humorous air; his hesitation contrasted so sharply with the confident readiness of her new visitor.

"I've come on business," said Ashley.

"Business?" she echoed, with an unpleasant reminiscence of Mr. Sidney Hazlewood and his views as to the nature of an agreement.

"I want you to help me to organise something."

"Oh, I couldn't. I hate all that sort of thing. It's not a bazaar, is it?"

"No. Perhaps we might call it a *fête*. It's a day in the country, Miss Pinsent."

"Oh, I know! Children! You mean those children?"

He leant back in his chair and looked at her before he replied. She seemed a little hurt and regretful, as though his visit were not proving so pleasant as she had expected; a visit should be paid, as virtue should be practised, for its own sake.

"No," he said. "Not those children. These children."

She took an instant to grasp the proposal; then her eyes signified her understanding of it; but she did not answer it.

"Why not?" he urged, leaning forward.

She broke into a light laugh.

"There's no reason why not—"

"Ah, that's right!"

"Except that I'm not sure I want to," continued Ora. She put her head a little on one side, with a critical air. "I wonder if you'd amuse me for a whole day," she said.

"You quite mistake my point of view," he replied, smiling. "I never expected to amuse you. I want you to amuse me. I'm quite selfish about it."

"That's just making use of me," she objected. "I don't think I was created only to amuse you, you know."

"Perhaps not; but let me have the amusement first. The trouble'll come soon enough."

"Will it? Then why—"

"Oh, you understand that well enough really, Miss Pinsent."

"What would that nice serious girl you're going to marry say if she heard of our outing?"

"I haven't received the news of my engagement yet."

"Irene says you're certain to marry her."

"Well, at any rate she doesn't say I've done it yet, does she?"

"No," admitted Ora, smiling.

"And that's the point, isn't it? Will you come on Sunday?"

Sunday had looked rather grey; there was nothing but a lunch party, to meet a Dean who thought that the stage might be made an engine for good, and therefore wished to be introduced to Miss Pinsent. Oh, and there was a dinner to celebrate somebody's birthday—she had forgotten whose. Yes, Sunday was quite a free day. The sun shone here; it would shine merrily in the country. In short she wanted to go.

"Oh, well, I don't mind trying to prevent you being

bored for just one day," she said, with her eyes merry and mocking.

"That's very kind of you," observed Ashley in a composed tone. "I'll call for you at eleven and carry you off."

"Where to?"

"I shall settle that. It's entirely for my sake we're going, you know, so I shall have my choice."

"It sounds as if you might enjoy yourself, Mr. Mead."

"Yes, quite, doesn't it?" he answered, laughing. Ora joined in his laugh; the world was no longer harsh; Lord Bowdon was nothing; there were no more reminiscences of the way Jack Fenning used to talk. There was frolic, there was a touch of adventure, a savour of mischief.

"It'll be rather fun," she mused softly, clasping her hands on her knee.

Behind the man's restrained bearing lay a sense of triumph. He had carried out his little campaign well. He did not look ahead, the success of the hour served. No doubt after that Sunday other things would happen again, and might even be of importance; meanwhile except that Sunday there was nothing. Merely that she came was not all — with her was not even very much. But he knew that her heart was eager to come, and that the Sunday was a joy to her also.

"It's dinner-time," she said, springing up. "Go away, Mr. Mead."

He was as obedient as Bowdon had been; enough had been done for to-day. But a farewell may be said in many ways.

"Sunday, then," he said, taking both her hands which she had held out to him in her cordial fashion. Lady Kilnorton said that Ora always seemed to expect to be

kissed. "Just manner, of course," she would add, since Ora was her friend.

"Yes, Sunday — unless I change my mind. I often do."

"You won't this time." The assertion had not a shred of question about it; it was positive and confident.

She looked up in his face, laughing.

"Good-bye," she said.

Bowdon had kissed her hand, but Ashley did not follow that example. They enjoyed another laugh together, and he was laughing still as he left her and took his way downstairs.

"Oh, dear!" she said, passing her hand over her eyes, as she went to get ready for dinner. She felt a reaction from some kind of excitement; yet what reason for excitement had there been?

With regard to the theatre the Muddock family displayed a variety of practice. Sir James never went; Bob frequented with assiduity those houses where the lighter forms of the drama were presented; Lady Muddock and Alice were occasional visitors at the highest class of entertainment. Neither cared much about evenings so spent as a rule; but Lady Muddock, having entertained Miss Pinsent, was eager to see her act. Ora was the only member of her profession whom Lady Muddock had met; to be acquainted with one of the performers added a new flavour. Lady Muddock felt an increased importance in herself as she looked round the house; there must be a great many people there who knew nobody on the stage; she knew Miss Pinsent; she would have liked the fact mentioned, or at any rate to have it get about in some unobtrusive way. Before the first act was over she had fully persuaded herself that Ora had noticed her presence; she had looked

twice quite directly at the box! The little woman, flattered by this wholly fictitious recognition, decided audaciously that Sir James' attitude towards the stage was old-fashioned and rather uncharitable; everybody was not bad on the stage; she felt sure that there were exceptions. Anyhow it was nice to know somebody; it gave one a feeling of what Bob called — she smiled shyly to herself — "being in it." She was very careful never to talk slang herself, but sometimes it expressed just what she wanted to say. She pulled out her pink silk sleeves to their fullest volume (sleeves were large then) and leant forward in the box.

Between the acts Babba Flint came in. He was a club acquaintance of Bob's, and had met the ladies of the family at a charity bazaar. It was a slender basis for friendship, but Babba was not ceremonious. Nobody knew why he was called Babba (which was not his name), but he always was. He was a small fair man, very smartly dressed; he seldom stopped talking and was generally considered agreeable. He talked now, and, seeing the bent of Lady Muddock's interest, he made Ora his theme. Lady Muddock was a little vexed to find that Babba also knew Ora, and most of her colleagues besides; but there was recompense in his string of anecdotes. Alice was silent, looking and wondering at Babba — strange to be such a person! — and yet listening to what he was saying. Babba lisped a little; at least when he said "Miss Pinsent," the S's were blurred and indistinct. He had met her husband once a long while ago; "a fellow named Denning, no, Fenning; a good-looking fellow." "A gentleman?" Babba supposed so, but deuced hard-up and not very fond of work. She led him no end of a life, Babba had heard; so at last he bolted to America or somewhere. Babba

expressed some surprise that Mr. Fenning did not now return — he knew the amount of Ora's salary and mentioned it by way of enforcing this point — and declared that he himself would put up with a good deal at the hands of a lady so prepossessing as Miss Pinsent. Then Lady Muddock asked whether Miss Pinsent were really nice, and Babba said that she wasn't a bad sort to meet about the place but (Here he broke into a quotation from a song popular in its day), "You never know what happens downstairs." Lady Muddock tried to look as though she had received information, and Babba withdrew, in order to refresh himself before the rise of the curtain.

Ora played well that night, indeed played Mr. Hazlewood off the stage, according to his own confession and phraseology. There was a ring in her laugh, a rush in her passion, a triumph in her very walk. Alice found herself wondering whether what happened to the woman herself had much effect on her acting, how complete or incomplete the duality of person was, how much was put on and put off with the stage dresses and the stage paint. But, after all, the woman herself must be there before them, the real creature, full of life and yet straining her great gift of it to the full. Alice had heard men described as "living hard." That phrase generally meant something foolish or disreputable; but you could live hard without dissipation or folly, at least in the ordinary sense of those words. You could take all there was in every hour out of it, put all there was of you into every hour, taste everything, try everything, feel everything, always be doing or suffering, blot out the uneventful stretches of flat country so wide in most lives, for ever be going up or down, breasting hills or rattling over the slopes. It must be strange to

be like that and to live like that. Was it also sweet? Or very sweet when not too bitter? And when it was very bitter, what came of it? Surely the mightiest temptation to lay it all aside and go to sleep? Alice drew back with a sudden sense of repulsion, as though there were no health or sanity in such lives and such people. Then she looked again at the beautiful face, now strained in sorrow, with hands stretched out in such marvellous appeal, the whole body a prayer. Her heart went out in pity, and, with a sudden impulse, cried to go out in love. But she could come to no final conclusion about Ora Pinsent, and, vexed at her failure, was thinking when the curtain fell, "What does it matter to me?"

The arrangement for a Sunday in the country, had she known of it, might have made the question seem less simple to answer.

CHAPTER IV

BY WAY OF PRECAUTION

FOR some days back Irene Kilnorton had been finding it difficult to have amiable thoughts about Ora. That they are attractive, that they make a change where they come, that they are apt to upset what seemed to be settling itself very comfortably before their arrival, are not things which can reasonably be imputed as faults to the persons to whom they are attached as incidents; but neither do they at all times commend them. It could not be denied — at this moment Irene at least could not deny — that there was a wantonness about Ora's intrusions; she went where she might have known it was better that she should stay away, and pursued acquaintances which were clearly safer left in an undeveloped state. She was irresponsible, Lady Kilnorton complained; the grievance was not unnatural in her since she felt that she was paying part of the bill; it was Ora's debt really, but Ora was morally insolvent, and made her friends unwilling guarantors. The pleasant confidence with which she had awaited Bowdon's approaches and received his attentions was shaken; she found that she had wanted him more than she had thought, that she was less sure of getting him than she had supposed. He had been to see her two or three times; there was no falling off in his courtesies, no abrupt break in his assiduity. But a cloud hung about him. Being there, he seemed half

somewhere else; she suspected where the absent half of his thoughts might be found. He wore an air almost remorseful and certainly rather apologetic; Lady Kilnorton did not wish to be courted by way of apology. She knew it was all Ora Pinsent, and, although she was quite aware that there was a good deal to be pleaded on Ora's side of the question, she itched to say something — no matter what, provided it were pointed and unpleasant — about Jack Fenning. Babba Flint, with whom she was acquainted, had once described some young lady to her as his "second-best girl." Babba was deplorable, most deplorable; yet her anger borrowed from his strange vocabulary. She did not want to be anybody's "second-best girl." "Not," she added, "that I'm a girl at all. No more is Ora, for that matter." The pleasure of the hit at Ora outweighed the regret in her admission about herself.

With regard to Ashley Mead her mood was much lighter, and, as a consequence, much less repressed. Since she did not care greatly whether he came or not, she reproached him bitterly for not coming; being tolerably indifferent as to how he managed his life, she exhorted him not to be silly; having no concern in the disposal of his affections, she gave him the best possible advice as to where he should bestow them. This conversation happened at Mrs. Pocklington's, where everybody was, and it seemed to amuse Ashley Mead very much. But it was Friday night and Sunday was near, so that everything seemed to amuse and please him. She told him that Alice Muddock was somewhere in the rooms; he said that he had already paid his respects to Alice. Irene's glance charged him with the blindest folly. "How women are always trying to give one another away!" he exclaimed. "Oh, if you

won't see, you won't," she answered huffishly and leant back in her chair. The baffled mentor harboured a grievance! He looked at her for a moment, smiled, and passed on.

Presently Minna Soames came and sat down by her. Minna was one of those girls to whom it is impossible to deny prettiness and impossible to ascribe beauty; she sang very well and lived very comfortably by her concerts; she might, of course (or so she said), have made more on the stage, but then there was the atmosphere. Irene did not like her much and was inclined to think her silly. What matter? She began to exercise a circumscribed power of sarcasm on Ora Pinsent; in spite of a secret sense of shame, Irene became more and more gracious. Praise be to those who abuse whom we would abuse but cannot with propriety!

"I was quite surprised to see her at Lady Muddock's," observed Miss Soames with prim maliciousness.

Irene cast a glance at her companion; the remark was evidently innocent, so far as she was concerned; the malice was purely for Ora, not for her. Miss Soames was not aware how Ora had come to be at the Muddocks'! Irene reached the depths of self-contempt when, after ten minutes, Minna Soames went away still in ignorance of this simple fact. "I 'm a mean wretch," Irene Kilnorton thought; and so at the moment she was — as the best of us at certain moments are.

These same moments, in which we see ourselves as we are most careful that others shall not see us, are not so pleasant that we seek to prolong them. Irene plunged into the moving throng with the idea of finding somebody to talk to her and take her to supper. With some surprise, some pleasure, and more excitement than she was willing to admit, she chanced to meet Bowdon

almost immediately. Her temper rose to the encounter as though to a challenge. She suggested supper. She began to find herself in high spirits. The idea was in her that she would not surrender, would not give up the game, would not make Ora irresistible by shirking a fight with her. When they had secured a little table and sat down she began to talk her best; in this she was helped by the consciousness of looking her best; she did not fear to pin his eyes to her with keenest attention. But the expression of the watching eyes puzzled and annoyed her; they were eager and yet doubtful, appreciative but wistful. Was he trying to think her all he had been on the point of thinking her, still to see in her all that he wanted? Was he unhappy because he could not so think and so see? He almost gave her that impression. She was very gay and felt herself now almost brilliant; her contest was with that most gay and brilliant shape which came between his eyes and what she offered for their allurement. People passing by, in the usual ignorance and the usual confidence of passers-by, summed up the situation in a moment; Bowdon was only waiting for her leave to speak, she was absolutely confident of him. They envied her and said that she should not parade her captive quite so openly. She guessed what they thought; she was glad and was fired to new efforts. She alone would know how incomplete was the victory; for all the world she would be triumphant. Even Ora might think herself defeated! But why was he changed, why was she less charming to him, why must she strive and toil and force? In the midst of her raillery and gaiety she could have put her hands before her face, and hidden tears.

He was almost persuaded, he was eager to be persuaded. At this moment she seemed all he wanted; he

told himself angrily and persistently that she was all that any man could or ought to want, that she stood for the best and most reasonable thing, for sure happiness and stable content. If he left her, for what would he leave her? For utter folly and worse. She would be a wife to be proud of; there would be no need to apologise for her. Even had there been no Jack Fenning, he knew that a marriage with Ora Pinsent would seem even to himself to need some apology, that he would fear to see smiles mingled with the congratulations, and to hear a sunken murmur of sneers and laughter among the polite applause. He cursed himself for a fool because he did not on that very instant claim her for his. Why, the other woman would not even let him make love to her! He smiled bitterly as he recollected that it was not open to him to make a fool of himself, even if he would. He wanted the bad and could not have it, but because he wanted it vainly, now he was refusing the good. No raw boy could have sailed further in folly. Coming to that conclusion he declared he would take a firm hold on himself. Failing that, his danger was imminent.

They went up together from the supper-room. Now she was set to win or for ever to lose; she could not play such a game twice. "Don't leave me," she said, boldly and directly. "Everybody here is so tiresome. Let's go to the little room at the end, it's generally empty." He appeared to obey her readily, even eagerly, indeed to be grateful for her invitation; it shewed that he had not betrayed himself. The little room was empty and they sat down together. Now he was inclined to silence and seemed thoughtful. Irene, in inward tumult, was outwardly no more than excited to an unusual brightness. After one swift searching glance

at him, she faced the guns and hazarded her assault against the full force of the enemy. She began to speak of Ora, dragging her name into the conversation and keeping it there, in spite of his evident desire to avoid the topic. Of Ora her friend she said nothing untrue, nothing scandalous, nothing malicious; she watched her tongue with a jealous care; conscience was awake in her; she would have no backbiting to charge herself with. But she did not see why she should not speak the truth; so she told herself; both the general truths that everybody knew and the special truths which intimacy with Ora Pinsent had revealed to her. Ora spoke plainly, even recklessly, of others; why should she not be spoken about plainly, not recklessly, in her turn? And, no, she said nothing untrue, nothing that she would not have said to Ora's face, in the very, or almost the very, same words.

"Yes, she 's a strange creature," assented Bowdon.

"Now Ashley Mead 's mad about her! But of course he 's only one of a dozen."

Here was dangerous ground; she might have stirred a jealousy which would have undone all that was begun; with many men this result would have been almost certain. But with Bowdon there was wisdom in her line of attack; she roused pride in him, the haughtiness which was in his heart though never in his bearing, the instinct of exclusiveness, the quiet feeling of born superiority to the crowd, the innate dislike of being one of a dozen, of scrambling for a prize instead of reaching out to accept a proffered gift. Ashley Mead, the secretary of his Commission, his *protégé* — and a dozen more! The memory of his confidence to Ashley became very bitter; if Ashley were favoured, he would laugh over the recollection of that talk! He felt eager to shew Ashley that

it was all no more than a whim, hardly more than a joke. Well, there was a ready way to shew Ashley that — and, he told himself, to shew it to himself too, to convince himself of it, at least to put it out of his own power henceforth to question it by word or deed. The great and the little, the conviction of his mind and the prick of his vanity, worked together in him.

He was persuaded now that to go forward on this path would be wise, would make for the worthiness and dignity of his life, save him from unbecoming follies, and intrench him from dangers. If only he could again come to feel the thing sweet as well as wise! There was much to help him — his old impulses which now revived, her unusual brilliancy, the way in which she seemed to draw to him, to delight in talking to him, to make of him a friend more intimate than she had allowed him to consider himself before. He had meant the thing so definitely a few weeks ago; it seemed absurd not to mean it now, not to suppose it would be as pleasant and satisfactory now as it had seemed then. He had been in a delusion of feeling; here was sanity coming back again. He caught at it with an eager, detaining hand.

Suddenly Irene felt that the battle was won; she knew it clearly in an instant. There was a change in his manner, his tones, his eyes, his smile. Now he was making love to her and no longer thinking whether he should make love to her; and to her he could make love thus plainly with one purpose only, and only to one end. She had what she had striven for, in a very little while now it would be offered to her explicitly. For an instant she shrank back from plucking the fruit, now that she had bent the bough down within her reach. There was a revulsion to shame because she had tried, had

fought, had set her teeth and struggled till she won. What she had said of Ora Pinsent rose up against her, declaring that its truth was no honest truth since it was not spoken honestly. Babba Flint and his horrible phrase wormed their way back into her mind. But she rose above these falterings; she would not go back now that she had won — had won that triumph which all the world would suppose to be so complete, and had avoided that defeat the thought of whose bitterness had armed her for battle and sustained her in the conflict. In view of Bowdon's former readiness it would be grossly unfair, surely, to speak of hers as the common case of a woman leading a man on; his implied offer had never been withdrawn; she chose now to accept it; that was the whole truth about the matter.

He asked her to be his wife with the fire and spirit of a passion seemingly sincere; she turned to him in a temporary fit of joy, which made her forget the road by which she had travelled to her end. Her low-voiced confession of love made him very glad that he had spoken, very glad for her sake as well as for his own; it was a great thing to make her so happy. If he had refrained, and then found out the anticipations he had raised in her and how he had taught her to build on him, he must have acknowledged a grave infraction of his code. She was, after the first outburst of fearful delight, very gentle and seemed to plead with him; he answered the pleading, half unconsciously, by telling her that he had been so long in finding words because she had encouraged him so little and kept him in such uncertainty. When she heard this she turned her face up to his again with a curiously timid deprecatory affection.

He was for announcing the engagement then and there, as publicly as possible. His avowed motive was

his pride; a desire to commit himself beyond recall, to establish the fact and make it impregnable, was the secret spring. Irene would not face the whole assembly, but agreed that the news should be whispered to chosen friends.

"It 'll come to the same thing in a very little while," he said with a relieved laugh.

Before the evening ended, the tidings thus disseminated reached Ashley Mead, and he hastened to Irene. Bowdon had left her for the moment, and he detached her easily from the grasp of a casual bore. His felicitations lacked nothing in heartiness.

"But it's no surprise," he laughed. "I was only wondering how long you 'd put it off. I mean 'you' in the singular number."

That was pleasant to hear, just what she wanted to hear, just what she wished all the world to say. But she burned to ask him whether he had continued in the same state of anticipation during the last week or two. Suddenly he smiled in a meditative way.

"What 's amusing you?" she demanded rather sharply.

"Nothing," he answered. He had been thinking of Bowdon's midnight confidence. He reflected how very different men were. Some day, no doubt, he himself would make a proper and reasonable choice; but he could not have gone so straight from the idea (however foolish the idea) of Ora Pinsent to the fact of Irene Kilnorton. It was to lay aside a rapturous lyric and take up a pleasantly written tale. He found several other such similes for it, the shadow of Sunday being over his mind. He was in great spirits and began to talk merrily and volubly, making fun of his companion, of love, of engaged folk, and so on. She listened very contentedly for awhile, but then began to wonder why Bowdon did

not come back to her; she would have risked absurdity to be sure that he could not keep away. She knew men hated that risk above all; but surely he could come back now and talk to her again? She looked round and saw him standing alone; then he wanted to come. With her eyes she gave him a glad invitation; but as he approached there was a sort of embarrassment in his manner, a shamefacedness; he was too much a man of the world to wear that look simply because he had become a declared lover. And although Ashley was both cordial and sufficiently respectful there was a distant twinkle in his eye, as if he were enjoying some joke. Her apprehensions and her knowledge of the nature of her triumph made her almost unnaturally acute to detect the slightest shade of manner in either of the men. Men knew things about one another which were kept from women; had Ashley a knowledge which she lacked? Did it make her triumph seem to him not incomplete perhaps, but very strange? The glow of victory even so soon began to give place to discomfort and restlessness.

Ashley looked at his watch.

"I shall go," he announced. "I've been betrayed." He spoke with a burlesque despair. "A certain lady — you can't monopolise the tender affections, Lady Kilnorton — told me she would be here — late. It's late, in fact very late, and she's not here."

"Who was she?" asked Irene.

"Can you doubt? But I suppose she felt lazy after the theatre."

"Oh, Ora?"

"Of course," said Ashley.

"How silly you are! Isn't he?" She turned to Bowdon.

"He 's very young," said Bowdon, with a smile. "When he comes to my age —"

"You can't say much to-night anyhow, can you?" laughed Ashley.

"Ora never comes when she says she will."

"Oh, yes, she does sometimes," Ashley insisted, thinking of his Sunday.

"You have to go and drag her!"

"That 's just what I should do."

No doubt Bowdon took as small a part in the conversation as he decently could. Still it seemed possible to talk about Ora; that to Irene's present mood was something gained. Nobody turned round on her and said, "He 'd rather have had Ora, really," a fantastic occurrence which had become conceivable to her.

"Your Muddocks have gone, haven't they?" she asked Ashley.

"Yes, my Muddocks have gone," said Ashley, laughing. "But why 'my' Muddocks? Am I responsible for them?"

"They ought to be your Muddocks. I try to get him to be sensible." The last sentence she addressed to Bowdon with a smile. "But men won't be."

"None of them?" asked Bowdon, returning her smile.

"Oh, don't say you 're being sensible," she cried, half-laughing, half-petulantly. "I don't want you to be; but I think Mr. Mead might."

"Marriage as a precautionary method doesn't recommend itself to me," said Ashley lightly, as he held out his hand in farewell. They both laughed and watched him as he went.

"Silly young man!" she said. "You 'll take me to my carriage, won't you?"

Ashley might be silly; they were wise. But Wisdom often goes home troubled, Folly with a light heart. The hand of the future is needed to vindicate the one and to confound the other. No doubt it does. The future, however, is a vague and indefinite period of time.

CHAPTER V

A DAY IN THE COUNTRY

WHEN Ashley Mead called for her at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning Miss Pinsent was not dressed. When she made her appearance at a quarter to twelve she was rather peevish; her repertory embraced some moods quite unamiable in a light way. She did not want to go, she said, and she would not go; she wondered how she had come to say she would go; was he sure she had said so?

"Oh, you must go now," said Ashley cheerfully and decisively.

"Why must I, if I don't want to?"

"Honour, justice, kindness, pity; take your choice of motives. Besides —" he paused, smiling at her.

"Well, what besides?"

"You mean to go." The stroke was bold, bold as that of Lady Kilnorton's about Ashley being one of a dozen.

"Are you a thought-reader, Mr. Mead?"

"A gown-reader on this occasion. If that frock means anything it means the country."

Ora smiled reluctantly, with a glance down the front of her gown.

"It 's quite true I didn't mean to go," she said. "Besides I didn't think you 'd come."

"A very doubtful truth, and a quite unnecessary fiction," said he. "Come along."

She came, obedient but still not gay; he did not force the talk. They went to Waterloo and took tickets for a quiet village. He gave her all the Sunday papers and for a time she read them, while he leant back, steadily and curiously regarding the white smooth brow which shewed itself over the top of the sheet. He was wondering how she kept the traces of her various emotions (she was credited with so many) off her face. For lines she might have been a child; for eyes too, it seemed to him sometimes, while at other moments all possibilities of feeling, if not of knowledge, spoke in her glance. After this, it seemed a poor conclusion to repeat that she was interesting.

Presently she threw away her paper and looked out of the window with a grave, almost bored, expression. Still Ashley bided his time; he took up the discarded journal and read; its pleasant, discursive, unimportant talk was content with half his mind.

"I suppose," she said absently, "that Irene and Lord Bowdon are spending the day together somewhere."

"I suppose so; they ought to be, anyhow."

A long pause followed, Ashley still reading his column of gossip with an appearance of sufficient attention. Ora glanced at him, her brows raised a little in protest. At last she seemed to understand the position.

"I'm ready to be agreeable as soon as you are," she announced.

"Why, then, it's most delightful of you to come," was his answer, as he leant forward to her; the paper fell on the floor and he pushed it away with his foot. "Will they enjoy themselves, that couple?"

"She wrote to me about it yesterday, quite a long letter."

"Giving reasons?"

"Yes; reasons of a sort, you know."

"I thought so," he nodded. "Somehow both of them seemed anxious to have reasons, good sound reasons."

"Oh, well, but she's in love with him," said Ora. "I suppose that's a reason."

"And he with her?"

"Of course."

It had been Ora's firm intention not to refer in the most distant manner to what had passed between Bowdon and herself. But our lips and eyes are traitors to our careful tongues; and there are people who draw out a joke from any hiding-place.

"He's done a very wise thing," said Ashley, looking straight into her eyes. She blushed and laughed. "I admire wise things," he added, laughing in his turn.

"But don't do them?"

"Oh, sometimes. To-day for example! What can be wiser than to refresh myself with a day in the country, to spend a few hours in fresh air and — and pleasant surroundings?"

She looked at him for a moment, then settled herself more luxuriously on the seat as she murmured, "I like being wise too."

The one porter at the little station eyed Ora with grave appreciation; the landlady of the little inn where they procured a plain lunch seemed divided between distrust of the lady and admiration of her garments. Ashley ordered an early dinner and then invited his friend to come out of doors.

He had brought her to no show view, no famous prospect. There was only a low slow stream dawdling along through the meadows, a belt of trees a quarter of a mile away behind them, in front a stretch of flat land

beyond the river, and on the water's edge, here and there, a few willows. She found a convenient slope in the bank and sat down, he lying beside her, smoking a cigar. The sun shone, but the breeze was fresh. Ora had been merry at lunch but now she became silent again. When Ashley Mead threw the stump of his cigar into the stream, she seemed to rouse herself from a reverie and watched it bob lazily away.

"Sleepy after lunch?" he asked.

"No, I'm not sleepy," she answered. "I was letting things pass through my head." She turned to him rather abruptly. "Why did you bring me here to-day?" she asked, with a touch of protest in her voice.

"Purely a desire for pleasure; I wanted to enjoy myself."

"Are you like that too? Because I am." She seemed to search his face. "But there 's something else in you."

"Yes, at other times," he admitted. "But just then there wasn't, so I brought you. And just now there isn't."

She laughed, rather nervously as it seemed to him.

"And what do the other things, when they 're there, say to it?" she asked.

"Oh, they 're sure of their innings in the end!" His tone was careless, but his eyes did not leave her face. He had meant not to make love to her; he would not have admitted that he was making love to her. But to have her face there and not look at it had become impossible; it chained him with its power of exciting that curiosity mingled with attraction which is roughly dubbed fascination. He felt that he must not only see more of her but know more of her; there was a demand of the brain as well as a craving of the emotions. She seemed moved to tell him nothing; she made no dis-

closures of her past life, where she had been born or bred, how she had fared, how come where she was, how become Mrs. Jack Fenning, or how now again turned to Ora Pinsent. She left him to find out anything he wanted to know. Her assumption that there was nothing to tell, or no reason to tell anything, spurred him to further study of her. That he studied at his peril he knew well and had known from the first; it was but another prick of the spur to him.

She had been gazing across the stream, at the meadows and the cattle. Now her eyes returned to him and, meeting his glance, she laughed again in that half-amused, half-embarrassed way.

"Shall I make up a life for you?" he asked. "Listen now. You weren't pretty as a young girl; you were considered very naughty, rather good-for-nothing; I think they were a bit down on you, tried to drill you into being like other people, to — what's the word? — eradicate your faults, to give you the virtues. All that made you rather unhappy; you'd a good deal rather have been petted. But you weren't drilled, your faults weren't eradicated, you never got the virtues."

She was listening with a smile and amused eyes.

"The training broke down because you began to grow beautiful and coaxing; they couldn't drill you any more; it wasn't in their hearts. They began to see that they'd got something uncommon; or perhaps they just despaired. They said it was Ora's way. — "

"Lizzie's way," she corrected with a merry nod.

"Oh, no. Hang Lizzie! They said it was Ora's way, and that it was no use bullying the girl. Your father said it first and had some trouble in convincing your mother. But he did at last. Then you grew up, and everybody made love to you. And I expect some-

body died and home wasn't so comfortable. So some time or other you took a flight away, and the stage became a reality. I suppose it had been a dream. And at some time or other you took a certain step. Then I don't know anything more except what's written in the Chronicles of Queen Ora Pinsent." He ended the story, which had been punctuated by pauses in which he gathered fresh information from her face.

"You've done well to find out so much. It wasn't very unlike that. Now tell me the future. What's going to happen to me?"

"You're going to be young and beautiful for ever and ever."

She laughed joyfully.

"Oh, yes!" she cried. "Let me see. I shall be young — young enough — for ten years more, and with the proper appliances beautiful for twenty."

His laugh was reluctant; the mention of the proper appliances jarred on him a little. She saw it in an instant and answered with a defiance: "I rouge now when I want it."

"Are you rouged to-day?"

"You can look and see."

"I can look, but perhaps I can't see."

She rubbed her cheek hard with her hand and then showed him the palm.

"I hope that's proof," he said, "but these contrivances are so cunning now-a-days."

"Men think them even more cunning than they are," laughed Ora. "And what have you done?" she went on. "What's your life been?"

"The deplorably usual — preparatory school, public school, Oxford, Bar. I'm a full-blown specimen of the ordinary Englishman of the professional classes."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'm sure I don't know. As little work as I must and as little harm as I can, I suppose."

She laughed as she said: "At any rate you aren't doing much work to-day, are you? And no harm at all! But you've left out what you put in for me — a certain step."

"Well, you've taken it, and I haven't."

"You will. Oh, Irene Kilnorton has told me all about it. It seems you can't help it, Mr. Mead. I liked her; I asked her to come and see me, but she's never been."

He made a little grimace, wrinkling brow and nose. Ora laughed again. "You won't be able to help it," she declared, nodding her head. "And then no more Sundays out with actresses!"

"Even as matters stand, it's not a habit of mine," he protested.

She smoked a cigarette of his, investing the act of luxury with a grace which made it meritorious; as she blew out the last of the smoke, she sighed, saying,

"I wish to-day would last for ever."

"Do you?" he asked in a low voice. The tone startled her to a sudden quick glance at his face. Her words had given expression to his longing that this simple perfection of existence should never pass.

"Just the meadows, and the river, and the sunshine."

"You leave me out?"

"No," she said, "you may be somewhere in it, if you like. Because if nothing was going to change, I shouldn't change either; and I like you being here now, so I should like you being here always."

"Do you always expect to change to people?"

"It's not altogether me. They change to me, I think."

"If I don't change to you, will you promise not to change to me?" He laughed as he spoke, but he looked at her intently. She turned away, saying,

"I should be rather afraid never to change to a person. It would make him mean so terribly much to one, wouldn't it?"

"But you married?" he whispered, whether in seriousness or in mockery he himself could hardly tell.

"Yes," she said. She seemed to agree that there was a puzzle, but to be unable to give any explanation of it. The fact was there, not to be mended by theorising about it.

In long intimate talk the hours were wearing away. His impulse was delicately to press her to reveal herself, to shew her mind, her way of thought, her disposition towards him. But side by side with his interest came the growing charm of her; he hardly knew whether to talk to her or to be silent with her, to elicit and trace the changes animation made, or to admire the dainty beauty of her features in repose. Movement and rest alike became her so well that to drive out either for the other seemed a gain burdened with an equal loss; her quick transitions from expression to expression were ruthless as well as bountiful. She appeared very happy, forgetful now of the puzzle that he had called to her mind, of the distrust that had afflicted her, entirely given over to the pleasure of living and of being there. Then she liked him; he was no jar, no unwelcome element. But there was still a distance between them, marked by her occasional nervousness, her ignoring of a remark that pressed her too closely, her skirting round topics which threatened to prove too serious.

She seemed to ask him not to compel her to any issue, not to make her face any questions or attempt any determination, to let her go on being happy as long as might be possible without driving her to ask why she was happy or how long she would be. Happy she was; as they rose reluctantly to go back to the inn she turned to him, saying:

"I shall never forget the day you 've given me."

But, arrived at the inn, she forgot her love of the meadows. Now she was glad to be in the snug parlour, glad dinner was near, glad to sit in a chair again. She went upstairs under the escort of the questioning admiring landlady, and came down fresh and radiant. In passing she gave him her hand, still cool and moist from water. "Isn't that nice?" she asked, and laughed merrily when he answered, "Oh, well, nice enough." The window opened on a little garden; she flung it wide. "There 's nobody to spy on how much we eat," she said, "and the evening smells sweet. Oh, do let 's begin!" And she clapped her hands when the meal came. Ashley found a sort of pity mingling with his other feelings for her, compassion for the simplicity and readiness of emotion which expose their possessor to so many chances of sorrow as well as to a certainty of recurrent joys. But he fell in with her mood and they joined in a childish pretence that they were at a great banquet, dignifying the simple chicken with titles they recollected from *menus* or constructed from imagination, while the claret, which could make no great claims on intrinsic merit, became a succession of costly vintages, and the fictitious bill, by which she declared she would measure his devotion to her, grew by leaps and bounds. It was strange to realise that in twenty-four hours she would be back in her theatre, a great, at

least a notorious, personage, talked of, stared at, canvassed, blamed, admired, the life she herself made so simple a thing given over to a thousand others for their pleasure and curiosity. A touch of jealousy made itself felt in his reflexions.

"I'm beginning rather to hate your audiences," he said.

A shrug and a smile sent the audiences to a limbo of inexpressible unimportance.

"You'll think differently about that to-morrow," he warned her.

"Be content with what I feel to-night; I am."

They had finished dinner; both again had smoked cigarettes.

"How long before the train?" she asked.

"An hour and a half," he answered with a hint of triumph in his voice; the end was not yet; even after the time for the train there was the journey.

Evening fell slowly, as it seemed with a sympathetic unwillingness to end their day. She moved to an armchair by the side of the window and he sat near her. Talk died away unmissed and silence came unnoticed. She looked a little tired and leant back in her seat; her face shewed pale in the frame of dark hair that clustered round it; her eyes were larger and more eloquent. The fate that he had braved, or in truth invited, was come; he loved her, he so loved her that he must needs touch her. Yet there was that about her which made his touch timid and light; a delicacy, an innocence which he was inclined to call paradoxical, the appeal of helplessness, a sort of unsubstantiality that made her seem the love for a man's soul only. One of her hands lay on the arm of her chair; he laid his lightly on it and when she turned smiled at her. She smiled back at

him with deprecation but with perfect understanding. She knew why he did that; she did not resent it. She turned her hand over and very lightly grasped his fingers in a friendly tender pressure; she gazed again into the little garden while their hands were thus distantly clasped. She seemed to yield what she must and to beg him to ask no more. He longed to be able to do her will as it was and not to seek to change it, to offer her no violence of entreaty and to bring her into no distress. But the sweetness of love's gradual venturing allured him; it might be still that she only tolerated, that she gave a return for her day's happiness, and allowed this much lest she should wound a man she liked. With that he was not content, he was hotly and keenly discontent. She had become everything to him; he must be everything to her; if it must be, everything in sorrow and renunciation, but everything; if not for always, at least for now, for the end of this golden day, everything. He could not go home without the memory of her lips. He leant forward towards her; she turned to him. For a moment she smiled, then grew grave again; she let him draw her nearer to him, and with averted face and averted eyes suffered his kiss on her cheek. In the very midst of his emotion he smiled; she preserved so wonderfully the air of not being responsible for the thing, of neither accepting nor rejecting, of being quite passive, of just having it happen to her. He kissed her again; after much entreaty, once she kissed him lightly, shyly, under protest as it were, yet with a sincerity and gladness which called out a new tenderness in him; they seemed to say that she had wanted to do it very much long before she did it, and would want to do it again, and yet would not do it again. The kiss, which from many women would

have levelled all barriers, seemed to raise new ones round her. He was ashamed of himself when his love drove him to besiege her more. Even now she was not resentful, she did not upbraid or repel him; she broke into that little nervous laugh of hers, as she lay back passive in the chair, and murmured so low that he hardly caught the words, "Don't. Don't make love to me any more now."

Her prohibition or request had availed with Bowdon's hesitating conscience-ridden impulse; perhaps there was small cause to wonder at that. It availed now no less with Ashley Mead's impetuous passion. Her low whisper protected her absolutely; the confession it hinted disarmed him; he caught both her hands and held them in a long clasp, looking the while into her appealing eyes. But he entreated her no more and he kissed her no more. A moment later he rose, went and sat on the window-sill, and lit a cigarette; the glow seemed a tiny beacon of fire to shew the harbour, that danger was past, that her orders were understood and accepted. She lay very quiet, looking at him with steady, grateful, loving eyes, acknowledging a kindness that she had not doubted and yet found fine in him. His transgression — perhaps she hardly counted it one — was forgiven because he stayed his steps at her bidding. He knew that she trusted him; and in spite of her prohibition he believed that she loved him.

Now one of the riddles about her seemed to find an explanation. He understood how she had passed through the dangers and the ordeal, and had come out still with her freshness and her innocence; how her taste had saved her from those who would have been deaf to the appeal that had arrested him, how powerful and sufficing a shield that appeal was to any man

whom her taste would allow to come close to her in comradeship. You could not be false to a confidence like that; if you were a man who could, you would never have the chance. Thus Ashley summed up a case which a little while ago had seemed to him very strange. It seemed strange and unusual still, with a peculiar charm of its own. It was weakness breeding strength, surrender made security. It put a man on his honour; it took away the resistance which might make honour forget itself in the passion of victory. It was like being made guardian of another's treasure; you were careful of it, however heedless you were of your own.

As they journeyed home, she was mirthful and joyous. This day was done, but she did not despair of the world; there should be other days, and the work of this day should endure. She made plans by which they were to meet, to be much together, to unite their lives by many ties. She let him see how much he had entered into her schemes; she told him plainly again and again that he had become to her quite different from all other men. She revealed to him her little habits, her tempers, her ways, her manœuvres, her tricks; she had plenty of all of them. She shewed an open delight in the love which she had won from him and made no pretence of concealing anything of what he was to her. Of Jack Fenning she said not a word; of caution in the externals of her own behaviour, of what people might think or say, of any possible difficulties in their relation to one another, not a word. She was happy and she was grateful. He took her to the door of her own house; she was not hurt but seemed a little surprised that he would not go in. He did not offer to kiss her again, but could not avoid thinking that she would have

been neither angry nor grieved if he had. His last memory was of her looking round her door, smiling delightedly and nodding to him, her eyes full of a thousand confidences. "Come soon," she called at last before she hid herself from his sight.

When he reached his own rooms, he found awaiting him a note from Sir James Muddock, begging him to come to the office at Buckingham Palace Road at eleven the next morning. "I have had an interview with my doctor," the old man wrote, "which makes it necessary for me to consider very seriously certain immediate steps. I hope that I shall be able to rely on your assistance." The note was sent by hand and marked "Immediate." Its meaning was plain enough. The long-expected verdict had come; Sir James must be relieved; another head was wanted in the firm of Muddock and Mead. With his brain still full of Ora Pinsent the matter of the message seemed remote to Ashley, but he forced himself to descend to it. He was to have the offer of a partnership, the offer of great wealth, the opportunity of a career limited only by his own talents and no longer clogged by poverty. Would the offer be free, or hampered by a tacit unacknowledged understanding? He knew well enough Sir James' mind about his future. How strange that future looked in the after-glow of this day! Yet what future had this day? Here was a question that he could not bring himself to discuss patiently. Future or no future, this day had altered his life, seemed at this moment to have altered it so completely that on it and on what had happened in it would turn his answer to the offer of great wealth and the prospect of a career. Even in his own thoughts he observed that reticence about Alice Muddock which would have governed his tongue in

speaking of her to another; but, affect as he would, or thought himself obliged to, he knew that she formed a factor in the situation, that she was in her father's mind when he wrote, no less than that other object of the old man's love, the great firm in Buckingham Palace Road.

"It's strange," he thought, "that the thing, after dragging on so long, should come to a head now, to-night, just when —." He broke off his reflexions and, going to the window, looked out on the lights of the bridge and listened to the lessening noise of the town. He was dimly conscious that in this day of long idleness, by the slow low river and in the little inn, he had done more to draw the lines and map the course of his life than in any hour of labour, however successful and however strenuous. Fate had surprised him with a point-blank question, the Stand-and-deliver of a direct choice. Saying he would think it all over, he sat late that night. But thoughts will not always be compelled and disciplined; his vigil was but a pictured repetition of the day that he had lived. The day had been Ora's day. Hers also was the night.

CHAPTER VI

AWAY WITH THE RIBBONS!

FEW things make the natural man, a being who still occupies a large apartment in the soul of each of us, more impatient than to find people refusing to conform to his idea of the way in which they ought to seek and find happiness. So far as sane and sensible folk are concerned — there is no need to bring the Asylums into the argument — his way is the way; deviations from it, whether perversely deliberate or instinctive and unreasoned, are so many wanderings from the only right track. He likes money — then only fools omit to strive for it. Stability of mind is his ideal — what more wretched than to be tossed from mood to mood? A regular life is the sole means of preserving health in stomach and brain — it is melancholy to see persons preferring haphazard and ill-regulated existences. Nay, it makes this natural man rather vexed if we do not like his furniture, his favourite vegetable, his dentist, and so forth; his murmured "*De gustibus*" has a touch of scorn in it. He conceives a grudge against us for upsetting established standards of excellence in matters of life, conduct, upholstery, and the table. Our likings for people in whom he sees nothing puzzle and annoy him equally; the shrug with which he says, of a newly married couple for instance, "They seem very happy," adds quite clearly, "But on no reasonable grounds have they a right to be, and in my heart I can't quite believe they are."

Sir James Muddock — once again the occasion of generalisations — had never been able to understand why Ashley Mead did not jump at the chance of Alice Muddock's hand and a share in Buckingham Palace Road. The lad was poor, his prospects were uncertain, at the best they could not yield wealth as Sir James had learnt to count it; the prejudice against trade is only against trade on a small scale; any ambitions, social or political, would be promoted, not thwarted, by his entry into the firm. As for Alice, she was the best girl in the world, clever, kind, trustworthy; she was very fond of him; he was fond of her and appreciated her company. Ashley was turned thirty; he was not asked to surrender the liberty of early youth. He had had his fling, and to sensible men this fling was a temporary episode, to be enjoyed and done with. It was time for him to get into harness; the harness offered was very handsome, the manger well filled, the treatment all that could be desired. When Sir James summed up the case thus, he had no suspicion of what had passed during one Sunday in the country; it is fair to add that it would have made no difference in his ideas, if he had known of it. The day in the country with Ora Pinsent would have been ticketed as part of the fling and thus relegated to after-dinner memories. Sir James did not understand people to whom the fling was more than an episode, to whom all life went on being a series of flings of ever-changing dice, till at last and only in old age the box fell from paralysed fingers. Therefore he did not understand all that was in the nature of Ashley Mead; he would have understood nothing at all of what was in Ora Pinsent's.

Ashley's decision had taken itself, as it seemed, without any help or effort on his part. Here was the warrant of its inevitability. He thought, when he first read

the old man's summons, that he was in for a great struggle and faced with a hard problem, with an anxious weighing of facts and a curious forecast of possibilities, that he must sit down to the scrutiny in idleness and solemnity. But somehow, as he slept or dressed or breakfasted, between glances at his paper and whiffs of his pipe, he decided to refuse many thousands a year and to ignore the implied offer of Alice Muddock's hand. In themselves thousands were good, there was nothing to be said against them; and of Alice he had been so fond and to her so accustomed that for several years back he had considered her as his most likely wife. She and the thousands were now dismissed from his life — both good things, but not good for him. He sighed once with a passing wish that he could be different; but being what he was he felt himself hopelessly at war with Sir James' scheme as a whole, and with every part of it. Contrast it with the moods, the thoughts, the atmosphere of life which had filled his yesterday! And yesterday's was his native air; thus it seemed to him, and he was so infected with this air that he did not ask whether but for yesterday his decision would have been as easy and unfaltering.

The old man was hurt, grieved, and, in spite of previous less direct rebuffs, bitterly disappointed; he had not thought that his offer would be refused when expressly made; he had not looked to see his hints about his daughter more openly ignored the more open they themselves became. His anger expressed itself in an ultimatum; he flung himself back in his elbow chair, saying,

"Well, my lad, for the last time, take it or leave it. If you take it, we 'll soon put you through your facings, and then you 'll be the best head in the business. But if you won't have it, I must take in somebody else."

"I know, Sir James. Don't think I expect you to go on giving me chances."

"If it 's not you, it 's got to be Bertie Jewett." Bertie Jewett was Herbert, son of Peter Jewett who had served through all the changes and lately died as Manager in Buckingham Palace Road. "He won't refuse, anyhow." The tone added, "He 's not such a fool."

"No, he 's not such an ass as I am," said Ashley, answering the tone and smiling at poor Sir James with an appealing friendliness.

"That 's your word, not mine; but I 'm not going to quarrel with it," said Sir James without a sign of softening. "What you 're after I can't see. What do you want?"

Ashley found himself unable to tell the Head of the Firm what he wanted.

"I can get along," he said lamely. "I make a bit writing for the papers, and there 's a brief once in a blue moon; and of course I 've got a little; and this secretaryship helps for the time."

This beggarly catalogue of inadequate means increased Sir James' scorn and bewilderment.

"Are you above it?" he asked with sudden heat.

"Good God, sir, don't think me a snob as well as an ass," prayed Ashley.

"Then I don't know what you do want."

Matters seemed to have reached a standstill. But Sir James had a last shot in his locker.

"Go up and lunch in Kensington Palace Gardens," he said. "Talk it over with the ladies, talk it over with Alice."

Ashley wanted to refuse; on this day he had no desire to see Alice. But refusal seemed impossible.

"All right, Sir James, I will," he said.

"Take a week, take a week more. If you say no

then, it 's Bertie Jewett — and your chance is gone for ever. For Heaven's sake don't make a fool of yourself." Affection mingling with wrath in the entreaty made it harder to resist.

Ashley walked off with the last words ringing in his ears; they recalled Lord Bowdon and the Athenæum corner. After reflexion and against inclination Bowdon had determined not to make a fool of himself, and had intrenched his resolution with apparent security against the possibility of a relapse into a less sensible course. Here was Ashley's example; but he shied at it.

"And how the devil am I to talk to Alice about it?" he exclaimed petulantly, as he struck across the front of Buckingham Palace and headed up Constitution Hill. There had been a general impression that he would marry Alice Muddock, and a general impression about us assumes to ourselves a vaguely obligatory force. We may not justify it, but we feel the need for some apology if we refuse. Besides Ashley had, up to a certain point, shared the impression, although in a faint far-off way, regarding the suggested alliance not as the aim of his life but as a possible and not unacceptable bourn of his youth. His entrance into the firm was a topic so closely connected that he felt much awkwardness in discussing it with Alice Muddock. Of her feelings he thought less than of his own; he was not by nature a selfish man, but he had now fallen into the selfishness of a great pre-occupation. The smallest joy or the lightest sorrow for Ora Pinsent would have filled his mind. It is difficult to feel in anything like this way towards more than one person at a time. His sympathy for Alice Muddock was blunted and he excused its want of acuteness by an affected modesty which questioned her concern in him.

It chanced that Lady Kilnorton was at lunch. She seemed in high spirits and talked vigorously. Her theme was the artistic temperament; she blamed its slavishness to the moment. Lady Muddock showed an anxiety to be furnished with details for purposes of increased disapproval; Alice was judicial. One man among three women, Ashley would have been content to listen, but, when appealed to, he defended the aspersed disposition. He felt the conversation approaching Ora Pinsent, step by step; she was in all their minds; the only case in point known to Lady Muddock, the instance most interesting to Alice, an unwelcome persistent presence to Irene, to him a subject to be neither encouraged nor avoided without risk of self-betrayal. It was curious how she had come into the circle of their lives, and having entered seemed to dominate it. But presently he grew sure of his face and, for the rest, preferred that they should abuse her rather than not speak of her; he grudged every abstraction of his thoughts which banished her image.

The discussion brought its trials. Irene's well-restrained jealousy and Lady Muddock's inquisitive disapproval were merely amusing; it was Alice's judicial attitude which stirred him to resentment. To assess and assay with this cold-blooded scientific accuracy seemed inhuman, almost from its excess of science unscientific, since it was a method so unsuited to the subject.

"Now take Ora," said Irene, at last grasping the nettle. "There 's nothing she wouldn't do for you at one moment, the next she wouldn't do anything at all for you."

"For her acquaintances, you mean?" Alice asked.

"Oh, no, my dear. For anybody, for her best friend.

You can't call her either good or bad. She's just fluke, pure fluke."

"Well, I know it's the thing to pretend not to like flukes — " Ashley began. The thin jocularity served for a shield.

"Oh, what's the use of asking a man? He just sees her face, that's all. Nobody's denying her looks." Lady Kilnorton seemed petulant.

"Of course a life like hers," observed Lady Muddock, "is very demoralising."

"My dear Lady Muddock, why?" asked Ashley, growing exasperated.

"Well, I only know what Minna Soames says, and — "

"Mother dear, Minna Soames is a goose," Alice remarked. Ashley was grateful, but still with reservations as to the judicial tone.

Irene Kilnorton, engaged in her secret task of justifying herself and taking a rosy view of Bowdon's feelings, talked more for her own ends than for those of the company.

"That sort of people suit one another very well," she went on. "They know what to expect of each other. Harm comes only when people of a different sort get entangled with them."

"You're vague," said Ashley. "What different sort?" He had partly fathomed her mood now, and his eyes were mischievous as he looked at her.

"Sensible people, Mr. Mead." There was a touch of asperity in the brief retort, which made a thrust from him seem excusable.

"Suppose Lord Bowdon had never seen you," he said with plausible gravity, "and, being in that state of darkness, had fallen in love with Miss Pinsent; would it have been so very surprising?"

"Very," said Irene Kilnorton.

"And dreadful?"

"Well, bad for him. He'd never have got on with her and—"

"There's Mr. Fenning," interposed Alice with a quiet laugh. A moment's pause ensued. Ashley had been startled at the introduction of the name, but he recovered himself directly.

"Oh, well," he said, "of course there's Mr. Fenning. I'd forgotten him. But he's quite accidental. Leave him out. He's not part of the case."

"But there's so often a Mr. Fenning," Alice persisted. "Can he be considered quite accidental?"

Ashley had made much the same remark in different words to Irene Kilnorton a few weeks before; but remarks do not bear transplanting.

"Isn't that rather a traditional view?" he asked.

"You mean a prejudiced one?"

"Well, yes."

"I suppose so. But prejudices start somehow, don't they?" Her smile was very gentle, but still, to his mind, horribly aloof and judicial. Could she not understand how a woman might be carried away, and blunder into a Mr. Fenning, *per incuriam* and all in a minute (so to speak)? In such a case was it to be expected that the Mr. Fenning in question should be all in all to her? In some ways perhaps she must acknowledge his existence; but at any rate she needn't Darby-and-Joan it with him!

"Poor dear Ora!" said Irene Kilnorton after a pause. Yet she was not naturally malicious any more than Ashley Mead was naturally selfish. If we are responsible for the moods we raise in others Miss Pinsent's account was mounting up. Ashley allowed himself the

retort of a laugh as Lady Muddock rose from the table.

"I came to talk to you," he said to Alice, as she passed him.

"Then drink your coffee quick, and come into the garden," she answered with her usual frank kindness. When she looked at him her aspect and air became less judicial.

In the garden he opened the subject of Sir James' proposal; his eyes were set straight in front of him, hers on the ground. Her answer would have dismayed Sir James, and it surprised Ashley. She was energetically, almost passionately, opposed to his entering the business.

"It's not your line, or your taste, or your proper work," she said. "What's the good of being rich if you're doing what you hate all the time?"

"I felt just like that," he said gratefully, "but I was afraid that I felt like it because I was a fool."

"You can make your own way. Don't sell yourself to the business."

He glanced at her stealthily; her colour had risen and her lip trembled. Did she think of anything besides the business when she bade him not sell himself? A moment later she laughed uneasily, as, with a reference to the conversation at lunch, she said.

"You've too much of the artistic temperament for Buckingham Palace Road."

"I? I the artistic temperament?" He accepted the trite phrase as a useful enough symbol of what they both meant.

"Yes," she answered steadily. "A good deal of it."

"Then I come under Irene Kilnorton's censures?"

"Under a good many of them, yes."

Something in her manner again annoyed and piqued

him. She was judging again, and judging him. But she was interesting him also. She spoke of him; she knew him well: and just now he was in some doubt about himself.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, seeking to draw her out.

"Oh, things carry you away; and you like it. You don't want to get to a comfortable place and stay there. I'm not saying anything you mind?"

"No. I don't think so, at least."

She glanced at him full for a moment as she said.

"I never think anything you'd mind, Ashley." Then she went on hastily. "But you must be prepared to see Bertie Jewett in great prosperity — a big house and so on — and to know it might all have been yours."

"I'm prepared for that," he said absently. He did not at all realise the things he was abandoning.

"But of course you'll get on. You'll be something better than rich."

"Perhaps, if I don't — don't play the fool."

"You keep calling yourself a fool to-day. Why do you? You're not a fool."

"It's only a way of speaking and not quite my own way, really," he laughed. "It means if I don't enjoy life a little instead of spoiling it all by trying to get something that isn't particularly well worth having; it means, in fact, if I don't allow scope to my artistic temperament." It meant also if he did not spend more days in the country with Ora Pinsent; for though he did not (as he had hinted) call that folly to himself, he was now on his defence against a world which would call it folly with no doubtful voice, and would exhort him earnestly to imitate Lord Bowdon's decisive measures of self-protection. It was in the power of this clear-sighted girl thus to put

him on his defence, even in the full swing of his attraction towards Ora Pinsent; better than anyone, she could shew him the other side of the picture. He fell into a silence occupied with puzzled thoughts. She grew grave, except for a sober little smile; she was thinking that it was easy to be wise for others, for all the world except herself; while she was playing the judicial prudent friend to him, the idea of another part was in her head. There may be hope without expectation; it would not have been human in her to hope nothing from this talk in the garden, to build no fancies on it. But she rebuked her imagination; whatever it was that filled his mind — and his occasional air of distraction had caught her notice — she had little share in it, she knew that well.

"The talk at lunch was *à propos*," she said presently. "I 'm going to call on Miss Pinsent this afternoon."

"You 're going to call — ?" The surprise was plain in his voice. This sudden throwing of the two together seemed an odd trick of circumstances! His tone brought her eyes quickly round to him and she looked at him steadily.

"Why not? She asked me. I told you so," she said. Ashley could not deny it; he shrugged his shoulders. "Shan't I like her?"

"Everybody must like her, I think," he answered, awkward, almost abashed. But then there came on him a desire to talk about Ora, not so much to justify himself as to tell another what she was, to exhibit her charm, to infect a hearer with his own fever. He contrived to preserve a cool tone, aiming at what might seem a dispassionate analysis of a fascination which everybody admitted to exist; but he was at once too copious and too happy in his description and his images. The girl beside him listened with that little smile; it could not be merry,

she would not let it grow bitter, but schooled it to the neutrality of polite attention. She soon saw the state of his mind and the discovery was hard for her to bear. Yet it was not so hard as if he had come to tell her of an ordinary attachment, of a decorous engagement to some young lady of their common acquaintance, and of a decorous marriage to follow in due course. Then she would have asked, "Why her and not me?" With Ora Pinsent no such question was possible. Neither for good nor for evil could any comparison be drawn. And another thought crept in, although she did not give it willing admittance. Ora was not only exceptional; she was impossible. Impossibility might be nothing to him now, but it could not remain nothing for ever. The pain was there, but the disaster not irrevocable. Among the somewhat strange chances which had marked the life of Mr. Fenning there was now to be reckoned a certain shamefaced comfort which he all unwittingly afforded to Alice Muddock. But Alice was not proud of the alliance.

Ashley broke off in a mixture of remorse and embarrassment. His description could not be very grateful to its hearer; it must have come very near to betraying its utterer. Alice did not pretend that it left her quite in the dark; she laughed a little and said jokingly:

"One would think you were in love with her. I suppose it's that artistic temperament again. Well, this afternoon I'll look and see whether she's really all you say. The male judgment needs correction."

As their talk went on he perceived in her a brightening of spirits, a partial revival of serenity, a sort of relief; they came as a surprise to him. The lightness with which she now spoke of Ora appeared, to a large degree at least, genuine. He did not understand that she

attributed to him, in more sincerity than her manner had suggested, the temper which had formed the subject of their half-serious half-jesting talk. Her impression of him did not make him less attractive to her; he was not all of the temper she blamed and feared; he had, she persuaded herself, just enough of it to save him from the purely ribbon-selling nature and (here came the point to which she fondly conducted herself) to give her both hope and patience in regard to her own relations with him. She could not help picturing herself as the fixed point to which he would, after his veerings, return in the end; meanwhile his share of the temperament excused the veerings. Lady Kilnorton had forced the game with entire apparent success, but Alice's quick eyes questioned the real completeness of that victory. She would play a waiting game. There was no question of an orthodox marriage with the young lady from over the way or round the corner, an arrangement which would have been odious in its commonplace humiliation and heart-breaking in its orderly finality. But Ora Pinsent was not a finality, any more than she was the embodiment of an orderly arrangement. That fortunate impossibility which attached to her, by virtue of Jack Fenning's existence, forbade despair, just as her fascination and her irresistibility seemed to prevent humiliation and lessen jealousy. The thing was a transient craze, such as men fell into; it would pass. If she joined her life to Ashley Mead's she was prepared (so she assured herself) for such brief wanderings of allegiance, now and then; as time went on, they would grow fewer and fewer, until at last she conquered altogether the tendency towards them. "And she must be ten years older than I am," her reflections ended; that the real interval was but seven did not destroy the importance of the point.

Having offered Ashley a lift to Piccadilly, she went off to get ready, and presently Bowdon, who had called to pick up Irene, strolled into the garden for a cigarette.

"Hullo, what are you doing here? You ought to be making your living," he cried good-humouredly.

"I've been throwing it away instead," said Ashley. "Should you like to be a partner in Muddock and Mead?"

"A sleeping one," said Bowdon with a meditative pull at his moustache.

Ashley explained that he would have been expected to take an active part. Bowdon evidently thought that he ought to have been glad to take any part, and rebuked him for his refusal.

"Take the offer and marry the girl," he counselled. "She'd have you all right, and she seems a very good sort."

"I don't feel like settling down all of a sudden," said Ashley with a smile.

They walked side by side for a few paces; then Bowdon remarked,

"Depend upon it, it's a good thing to do, though."

"It's a question of the best date," said Ashley, much amused at his companion. "Now at your age, Lord Bowdon—"

"Confound you, Ashley, I'm not a hundred! I say it's a good thing to do. And, by Jove, when it means a lump of money too!"

A pause followed; they walked and smoked in silence.

"Good creatures, women," remarked Bowdon.

Ashley did not find the remark abrupt; he traced its birth. Alice had left much the same impression behind her in his mind.

"Awfully," he answered; there was in his voice also

a note of remorse, of the feeling that comes when we cannot respond to a kindness so liberally as it deserves.

"Of course they aren't all alike, though," pursued Bowdon, as though he were reasoning out an intricate subject and coming on unexpected conclusions. "In fact they differ curiously, wonderfully."

His thoughts had passed, or were passing, from Irene Kilnorton to Ora Pinsent; obedient to this guidance Ashley's followed in a parallel track from Alice Muddock to Ora Pinsent.

"They're charming in different ways," said he with a slight laugh. Bowdon shewed no signs of mirth; he was frowning a little and smoked rather fast.

"And men are often great asses," he observed a few moments later. Again Ashley had kept pace, but his face was more doubtful than his companion's and there was hesitation in his voice as he replied,

"Yes, I suppose they are."

This subterranean conversation, shewing above ground only faint indications of what it really meant to each of the talkers, had carried them to the end of the garden. Turning round at the fence, they saw Irene and Alice walking towards them, side by side. Both ladies were well dressed, Irene rather brilliantly, Alice with quiet, subdued good taste; both seemed attractive, Irene for her bright vivacity and merry kindness, Alice for her strength of regard and a fine steady friendliness. A man who was fortunate enough to gain either of them would win a wife of whom he might justly be proud when he talked with the enemy in the gate, and moreover would enjoy an unusually good prospect of being happy in his own house. The man who had won one, and the man who could, if he would, win the other, approached them in a slow leisurely stroll.

"Yes, great asses," repeated Bowdon in a reflective tone.

"I didn't say we weren't," protested Ashley Mead with an irritated laugh.

They would have found a most heartfelt endorsement of the view which they reluctantly adopted, had Sir James Muddock known how small a share of Ashley's visit had been honestly devoted to a consideration of the advantages of a partnership in Muddock and Mead, and how much larger a part had been given to a subject concerning which Sir James could have only one opinion.

CHAPTER VII

UNDER THE NOSEGAY

WHEN Alice Muddock reached Ora's little house in Chelsea and was shewn into the drawing-room, she found herself enjoying an introduction to Mr. Sidney Hazlewood and forced to shake hands with Babba Flint. Hazlewood struck her favourably; there was a repressed resolution about him, a suggestion of being able to get most of what he might happen to want; no doubt, though, his desires would be limited and mainly professional. Babba was, as usual, quite inexplicable to her and almost intolerable. The pair had, it seemed, come on business, and, after an apology, Ora went on talking business to them for fully a quarter of an hour. She was in a businesslike, even a commercial money-grubbing mood; so were the men; amid a number of technical terms which fell on Alice's ignorant ears the question of what they would make was always coming uppermost. There was indeed a touch of insincerity in Ora's graspingness; it did not seem exactly affectation, but rather like a part for which she was cast on this occasion and into which she threw herself with artistic zeal. She had to play up to her companions. There was in her neither the quiet absorption in the pecuniary aspect which marked Mr. Hazlewood, nor the tremulous eagerness with which Babba counted imaginary thousands, the fruit of presupposed successes. Hazlewood, a clean-shaven hard-lined man of close on

fifty, and Babba with his long moustache, his smooth cheeks, his dandiness, and his youth, treated Ora exactly in the same way — first as a possible partner, then as a possible property. They told her what she would make if she became a partner and how much they could afford to pay her as a property if she would hire herself out to them. Ora had her alternative capacities clearly grasped and weighed their relative advantages with a knowing hand. Alice thought it a strange scene by which to make her first more intimate study of the irresistible impossible Miss Pinsent, the Miss Pinsent of uncontrollable emotions and unknowable whims. What images the world made of people! Yet somehow, in the end, had not the world a way of being just right enough to save its credit?

At last the conference appeared to be about to break up. Alice was almost sorry; she could have gone on learning from it.

"Only remember," said Mr. Hazlewood, "that if we do make a deal, why, it is a deal!"

Ora began to laugh; an agreement was an agreement, she remembered, and a deal, by parity of reasoning, a deal. Hazlewood's wrinkle clamoured for seriousness; hard money was at stake, and over that surely even genius could look grave.

"Oh, she won't want to cry off this," said Babba with a sagacious nod.

Alice had never known how Babba lived (any more than she knew why). It appeared now that he supported himself by speculations of this description; she fancied that he asserted himself so much because the other two seemed to consider him, in the end, rather superfluous; more than once he had to remind them that he was indispensable; they yielded the point good-naturedly.

She was interrupted in her thoughts by Hazlewood, who made a suave remark to her and held out his hand with a low bow. Ora was chaffing Babba about a very large flower in his buttonhole.

"Is Miss Pinsent a good woman of business?" Alice asked in an impulse of curiosity.

Hazlewood glanced at Ora; she was entirely occupied with Babba.

"Miss Pinsent," said he, with his overworked but still expressive smile, "is just exactly what you happen to find her. But if you call often enough, there 'll come a time when you 'll find her with a good head on her shoulders."

Alice felt vaguely sorry for Mr. Hazlewood; it must be wearing to deal with such unstable quantities. She could imagine herself exchanging sympathy with him on the vagaries of the artistic temperament; would she grow a wrinkle, of brow or of heart, over Ashley Mead? Or had she grown one?

"Well, you 've had a lot of experience of her, haven't you?" she asked, laughing, and wondering what he thought of Ora. His answer expressed no great affection.

"Good Lord, yes," he sighed, furrowing his brow again.

Ora darted up to him, put an arm through his, and clasped her hands over his sleeve.

"Abusing me?" she said, turning her face round to his. For a moment Alice thought that she was going to kiss him and hoped vaguely she would not; but she felt that she did not know the etiquette; it might be usual.

"Telling the truth," said Mr. Hazlewood with stout courage; then with pronounced gallantry he raised his

arm with Ora's hands on it and kissed one of the hands; his manner now was quite different from his business manner of a few moments ago; his eyes were different too, hardly affectionate, but very indulgent.

"He likes me really, you know, though I worry him dreadfully," said Ora to Alice.

Babba came up; he had been arranging the big flower before a mirror.

"Seen Lady Kilnorton lately? She's brought it off with Bowdon, I hear," he said to Alice.

"She's engaged to Lord Bowdon," said Alice stiffly.

"Deuced lucky woman," observed Babba, blind to the rebuke which lay in Alice's formality of phrase.

"Take him away," Ora commanded Mr. Hazlewood. "We've done with him and we don't want him any more. We aren't sure we like him."

"Oh, come now, I ain't a bad chap, Miss Pinsent," pleaded Babba piteously.

"We're not at all sure we like him," said Ora inexorably. "Take him away at once, please, Mr. Hazlewood." And Hazlewood led him out, protesting bitterly.

For a moment or two Ora moved about, touching the furniture into the places in which she wanted it, and fingering the flowers in the vases. Then she came quickly to Alice, sat down by her side, and cried expansively,

"It's really charming of you to come. And you're like — you're like something — Oh, I don't know! I mean you're a lovely change from those men and their business and their money."

"I like Mr. Hazlewood."

"Oh, so do I. But my life's so much Mr. Hazlewood. Why did you come?"

"You asked me," said Alice.

"Yes, I know, but I hardly thought you'd come." She darted back to the previous conversation. "I'm going to make a lot of money, though, and then I'm going to have a long holiday, and a villa somewhere in Italy."

"Oh, they won't let you rest long."

"It won't be very long really, because I shall spend all the money," Ora explained with a smile. "Let's have some tea."

She rang, and tea was brought by a very respectable middle-aged woman. Ora addressed her maid as Janet and gave her a series of orders; Janet listened to them with a non-committal air, as though she would consider whether they were reasonable or not, and act according to her conclusion. Alice noticed that she called her mistress "Ma'am;" the reference to Mr. Fenning was very indirect, but it was the first that Alice had ever heard made in Ora's presence. It seemed to her also that Janet laid some slight emphasis on the designation, as though it served, or might be made to serve, some purpose besides that of indicating the proper respect of a servant. She found herself wondering whether Janet dated from the time when Mr. Fenning was still a present fact and formed a member of the united Fenning household (which, by the way, was an odd entity to contemplate). If that were the case, a conversation with Janet might be very interesting; knowledge might be gained about the bulwark; Alice had begun to look on Mr. Fenning as a bulwark — and to tell herself that she did no such thing.

A large number of photographs stood on the mantelpiece and about the room, most of them signed by their originals. Many were of men; one might be of Mr.

Fenning. A silver frame stood on a little table just by the sofa. Alice's intuitive perception told her that here was Ora's favourite place; her traditions caused her to conclude that the frame (its back was towards her) held Mr. Fenning's portrait. She was not undiplomatic, only less diplomatic than many other women; she took a tour of inspection, saying how pretty the room was and declaring that she must look closer at the photograph of an eminent tragedian on the opposite wall. Her return movement shewed her the face of the portrait which she had guessed to be Mr. Fenning's; it was that of her friend Ashley Mead.

"Yes," said Ora, "he sent me that yesterday. I was so glad to have it."

"You gave him a return?" asked Alice with a careless laugh, the laugh appropriate to the moment.

"He chose one and I wrote on it. Sugar, Miss Muddock?"

Alice took sugar.

"You've known him ever so long, haven't you?" asked Ora, handing the cup.

"Ages, ever since we were children. He's very nice and very clever."

"I've only known him quite a little while." Ora paused and laughed. "Some people would say that's why his picture's in the place of honour."

"You like change?" asked Alice. Ashley liked change also. But Ora made her old defence.

"People change, so of course I change to them." The explanation did not quite satisfy herself. "Oh, I don't know," she said impatiently. "Anyhow I haven't left off liking Ashley yet. I may, you know."

Alice, conscious that she herself in her hostess' position would have said "Mr. Mead," tried to make the ob-

vious allowances; it was just like that clasping of the hands round Hazlewood's arm, just like the air of expecting to be kissed. Fully aware of insurgent prejudices, she beat them down with a despotic judgment; she would not follow in the wake of her stepmother nor adopt the formulas of Minna Soames. Curiously enough Ora was in somewhat the same or a parallel state of mind, although she did not realise it so clearly. She too was struggling to understand and to appreciate. She was sure she would be friends with Miss Muddock, if she could get within her guard; but why did people have guards, or why not drop them when other people shewed themselves friendly? You might have to keep the Babba Flints at their distance, no doubt, but even that was better done by ridicule than by stiffness.

"We still see a good deal of him," said Alice, "although he has an immense lot of engagements. He generally comes to lunch on Sunday."

Ora reflected that he had not followed his usual practice on one Sunday. Alice went on to give a brief description of Ashley's general relation to the Muddock family, and referred to her father's wish that he should enter the business.

"He came to talk to me about it to-day," she said, "but it wouldn't suit him in the least, and I told him so."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't," cried Ora. "I 'm so glad you told him right."

Their eyes met in a sudden glance. Did they both know so much of Ashley Mead, of his tastes, his temper, and what would suit him? An embarrassment arrested their talk. Alice was conscious that her hostess' eyes rested on her with an inquisitive glance; it had just occurred to Ora that in meeting this girl she had

encountered a part of the life of Ashley Mead hitherto unknown to her. "What part? How much?" her eyes seemed to ask. She was not jealous of Alice Muddock, but she was inclined to be jealous of all that life of Ashley's of which she knew nothing, which her visitor had shared. With a sudden longing she yearned for the inn parlour where he had no other life than a life with her; the sudden force of the feeling took her unawares and set her heart beating.

She came again to Alice and sat down by her; silence had somehow become significant and impossible.

"I like your frock," she said, gently fingering the stuff. "At least I like it for you. I shouldn't like it for me."

The relativity of frocks, being, like that of morals, an extensive and curious subject, detained them for a few moments and left them with a rather better opinion of one another. Incidentally it revealed a common scorn of Minna Soames, who dressed as though she were stately when she was only pretty; this also knit them together. But they progressed nearer to liking than to understanding one another. Small points of agreement, such as the unsuitability of the business to Ashley and the inappropriateness of her gowns to Minna Soames, made intercourse pleasant but could not bridge the gulf between them; they were no more than hands stretched out from distant banks.

Alice began to talk of Irene Kilnorton and Bowdon. While attributing to them all proper happiness and the finality of attachment incidental to their present position, she told Ora, with a laugh, that they had all seen how much Bowdon had been struck with her.

"I think he did like me," said Ora with a ruminative smile. "He 's safe now, isn't he?" she added a moment

later. The thought had been Alice's own, but it needed an effort for her to look at it from Ora's point of view. To be a danger and to know yourself to be a danger, to be aware of your perilousness in a matter-of-fact way, without either exultation or remorse, was a thing quite outside Alice's experience. On the whole to expect men to fall in love with you and to be justified in this anticipation by events would create a life so alien from hers that she could not realise its incidents or the state of mind it would create.

"I like Lord Bowdon," said Ora. "But—" she paused and went on, laughing, "He's rather too sensible for me. He'll just suit Irene Kilnorton. But really I must write and tell him to come and see me. I haven't seen him since the engagement."

"You'd much better not," was on the tip of Alice's tongue, but she suspected that the impulse to say it was born of her still struggling prejudices. "Ask them together," she suggested instead.

"Oh, no," said Ora pathetically. "He'd hate it."

Alice did not see exactly why he should hate it. Engaged people always went about together; surely always?

"Were you ever engaged?" Ora went on.

"Never," said Alice with a laugh.

"I've been — well, of course I have — and I hated it."

With curiosity and pleasure Alice found herself on the threshold of the subject of Mr. Fenning. But Ora turned aside without entering the hidden precincts.

"And I'm sure I should hate it worse now. You wouldn't like it, would you?"

"I should like it very much, if I cared for the man."

"Well," Ora conceded, "he might make it endurable,

if he treated it properly. Most men look so solemn over it. As soon as they've got you, they set to work to make you think what a tremendous thing you've done. As if that was the way to enjoy yourself!" She paused, seemed to think, smiled out of the window, and then, turning to Alice, said with an innocence evidently genuine, "Ashley Mead would make it rather pleasant, I think."

The trial was sudden; Alice had no time to put on her armour; she felt that her face flushed. Again their eyes met, as they had when it was agreed that the business would not suit Ashley. The glance was longer this time, and after Alice turned away Ora went on looking at her for several moments. That was it, then; Irene Kilnorton had not spoken idly or in ignorant gossip. What she had said fell short of truth, for she had spoken of an alliance only, not of love. Now Ora knew why the girl talked so much of Ashley; now she knew also why the girl shewed such interest in herself. Yes, the rich Miss Muddock would be Ashley's wife if she were wooed; besides being rich she was pleasant and clever, and knew how to dress herself. (This last moral quality ranked high in Ora's list.) Such an arrangement would be in all ways very beneficial to Ashley. She wondered whether Ashley knew how entirely the game was in his own hands. She felt a sudden and sore pity for Alice, who had been so cordial and so pleasant and whose secret she had heedlessly surprised. The cordiality seemed very generous; there was in it a challenge to counter-generosity. In an instant the heroic idea of giving him up to Alice flashed through her brain. This fine conception was hardly born before she found herself asking wrathfully whether he would consent to leave her.

Alice was herself again; she said that she thought Mr. Mead might make an engagement very pleasant, but that such a relation to him would perhaps not be very exciting to her, since she had known him all her life. This suppression of emotion was not to Ora's taste; it burked a scene to which her instinct had begun to look forward. But as generosity would be at this point premature (even if it should ever become tolerable) she was forced to acquiesce. A little later Alice took her leave with increased friendliness and a pressing invitation to Ora to come and see her at Kensington Palace Gardens when there was no party and they could have another quiet talk together.

Surrender — or the inn parlour? Generosity or joy? As an incidental accompaniment, correctness or incorrectness of conduct? These alternatives presented themselves to Ora when she was left alone. The *rôle* of renunciation had not only obvious recommendations but also secret attractions. How well she could play it! She did not exactly tell herself that she could play it well — the temperament has its decent reticences — but she pictured herself playing it well and wished for an opportunity to play it. She would have played it beautifully for Irene Kilnorton's benefit, had that lady asked her assistance instead of taking the matter into her own resolute hands. She would have sent Bowdon away with an exhortation to see his own good and to forget her, with a fully adequate, nay, a more than ample, confession of the pain the step was causing her, but yet with a determination which made the parting final and Irene's happiness secure. All this vaguely rehearsed itself in her brain as she lay on the sofa beside Ashley Mead's portrait in its silver frame. And her subsequent relations both with Irene and with

Bowdon would have been touched with an underlying tenderness and sweetened by the common recollection of her conduct; even when he had become quite happy with Irene, even when he had learnt to thank herself, he would not quite forget what might have been.

Having arrived at this point, Ora burst into a laugh at her own folly. All that went very well, so very smoothly and effectively, grouped itself so admirably, and made such a pretty picture. But she took up the photograph in the silver frame and looked at it. It was not Bowdon's likeness but Ashley Mead's; the question, the real question, was not whether she should give up Bowdon; fate was not complaisant enough to present her with a part at once so telling and so easy. It was not Bowdon with whom she had spent a day in the country, not Bowdon who had been with her in the inn parlour, not Bowdon who, Alice Muddock thought, might make an engagement very pleasant. The grace of self-knowledge came to her and told her the plain truth about her pretty picture.

"What a humbug I am!" she cried, as she set down the photograph.

For the actual opportunity was very different from the imagined, as rich in effect perhaps, but by no means so attractive. She still liked her part, but the rest of the cast was not to her taste; she could still think of the final interview with a melancholy pleasure, but, with this distribution of characters, how dull and sad and empty and intolerable life would be when the final interview was done! The subsequent relations lost all their subdued charm; underlying tenderness and common recollections became flat and unprofitable.

"An awful humbug!" sighed Ora with a plaintive smile.

Why were good things so difficult? Because this thing would be very good — for him, for poor Alice, for herself. A reaction from the joy of Sunday came over her, bringing a sense of fear, almost of guilt. She recollected with a flash of memory what she had said to Jack Fenning when they parted in hot anger. "You needn't be afraid to leave me alone," she had cried defiantly, and up to now she had justified the boast. She had been weary and lonely, she had been courted and tempted, but she had held fast to what she had said. Her anger and her determination that Jack should not be in a position to triumph over her had helped to keep her steps straight. Now these motives seemed less strong, now the loneliness was greater. If she sent Ashley away the loneliness would be terrible; but this meant that the danger in not sending him away was terrible too, both for him and for her. As she sank deeper and deeper in depression she told herself that she was born to unhappiness, but that she might at least try not to make other people as unhappy as she herself was doomed to be.

While she still lay on the sofa, in turns pitying, reproaching, and exhorting herself, Janet came in.

"A letter, ma'am," said Janet. "Your dinner will be ready in ten minutes, ma'am."

"Thanks, Janet," said Ora, and took the letter. The handwriting was not known to her; the stamp and postmark were American; Bridgeport, Conn., the legend ran. "I don't know anybody in Bridgeport, or in Conn. — Conn.? — Oh, yes, Connecticut," said Ora.

The silver frame stood crooked on the table. Ora set it straight, looked at the face in it, smiled at some thought, sighed at the same or some other thought, and lazily opened the letter from Bridgeport, Conn.; she

supposed it was a communication of a business kind, or perhaps a request for a photograph or autograph.

"My dear Ora, I have had an accident to my hand, so get a friend to write this for me. I am here in a merchant's office, but have had a bit of luck on Wall Street and am in funds to a modest extent. So I am going to take a holiday. I shall not come to England unless you give me leave; but I should like to come and see you again and pay you a visit. How long I stayed would depend on circumstances and on what we decided after we had met. A letter will find me here for the next month. I hope you will send one inviting me to come. I would write more if I could write myself; as it is I will only add that I am very anxious to see you and am sure I can set right any mistakes that there have been in the past. Write as soon as you can. Yours affectionately, Jack."

She turned back to the envelope: — "Miss Ora Pinsent." The friend who wrote Jack's letter probably did not know that he was writing to Jack's wife. Janet knew Jack's writing, but not the writing of Jack's friend. In secrecy and privacy Jack's letter had come. She laid it down beside the portrait in the silver frame, and lay back again quietly with wide-opened eyes. The clock ticked away ten minutes; dinner was ready; she lay still.

Had people a right to rise from the dead like this? Were they justified, having gone out of life, in coming back into it under cover of a friend's handwriting and a postage stamp? They had parted for ever, Jack and she, most irrevocably, most eagerly, most angrily. A few lines on a sheet of note paper could not change all that. He had been dead and gone; at least he had existed only as a memory and as — she hardly liked to

say an encumbrance — as a check, as a limiting fact, as a difficulty which of necessity barred her from ordering her doings just as she might have liked to order them. Now he proposed suddenly to become a fact, a presence, a part of her again, and stole a hearing for this proposal in the insidious disguise of a friend's handwriting. How he chose his time too! In wild fancy she imputed to him a knowledge of the curious appositeness of his letter's arrival. It came just when she was unhappy, torn with doubts, feeling low, yes, and feeling guilty; just after the revelation of Alice Muddock's feelings, just after the day in the country, just while she was saying that, for weal or woe, she could not send Ashley Mead away. At such a moment she would not have opened the letter had she known it for his; but he had had an accident to his hand and the unknown writing had gained him access.

Janet came in again.

"Your dinner is ready, ma'am," she said, and went on, "These have come for you, ma'am," laying a nosegay of roses on the little table beside the portrait in the silver frame, and the letter from Bridgeport, Conn.

Ora nodded; there was no need to ask whence the roses came; they were of the colour she had declared her favourite by the river bank on Sunday. "I'll come to dinner directly," she said, and seeing Janet's eye on the letter, she forgot that it was in a friend's handwriting and pushed it under the nosegay till the roses hid it. There was nothing to be seen on the table now but the roses of the colour she loved, and the picture in its silver frame.

To toy with material symbols of immaterial realities is pretty enough work for the fancy or the pen. The symbols are docile and amenable; the letter can be

pushed under the roses till their blooms utterly conceal it, and neither you nor anybody else can see that it is there. The picture you do not care about can be locked away in the drawer, the one you love placed on the little table by your elbow as you sit in your favourite seat. Unhappily this artistic arrangement of the symbols makes no difference at all to the obstinate realities. They go on existing; they insist on remaining visible or even obtrusive; audible and even clamorous. The whole thing is a profitless trick of the fancy or the pen. Although the letter was pushed under the roses, Jack Fenning was alive in Bridgeport, Conn., with a desire to see his wife in his heart, and his passage money across the Atlantic in his pocket.

As Ora drove down to the theatre that night, she moaned, "How am I to play with all this worrying me?" But she played very well indeed. And she was sorry when the acting was over and she had to go back to her little house in Chelsea, to the society of the letter and the roses. But now there was another letter: "I am coming to-morrow at 3. Be at home. A. M."

"What in the world am I to do?" she asked with woeful eyes and quivering lip. It seemed to her that much was being laid on the shoulders of a poor young woman who asked nothing but to be allowed to perfect her art and to enjoy her life. It did not occur to her that the first of these aims is accomplished by few people, that at any rate a considerable minority fail in the second, and that the fingers of two hands may count those who in any generation succeed in both. The apparent modesty of what she asked of fortune entirely deceived her. She sat in her dressing-gown and cried a little before she got into bed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LEGITIMATE CLAIMANT

ASHLEY MEAD did not take the week's consideration which Sir James had pressed on him. The same evening he wrote a letter decisively declining to assume a place at the helm in Buckingham Palace Road. Sir James, receiving the letter and handing it to Alice, was disappointed to meet with no sympathy in his expressed views of its folly. He was nearly angry with his daughter and frankly furious against Ashley. He was proud of his daughter and proud of his business; the refusal left him very sore for both. As soon as he reached his office he gave vent to his feelings by summoning Bertie Jewett to his presence and offering him the position to whose attractions Ashley had been so culpably blind.

Here there was no refusal. A slim, close-built, dapper little fellow, with a small fair moustache and small keen blue eyes, full of self-confidence, perfectly self-controlled, almost sublimely industrious, patiently ambitious, Bertie turned away from no responsibilities and let slip no opportunities. He knew himself Bob Muddock's superior in brains; he had known of, and secretly chafed against, the proposed intrusion of Ashley Mead. Now he was safe, and fortune in his hands. But to Bertie the beauty of firm ground was not that you can stand still on it and be comfortable, but that it affords a good "take-off" when you want to clear an obstacle which lies between you and a place even more desirable

in your eyes. Sir James explained the arrangements he proposed to make, his big share, Bob's moderate share, Bertie's small share; the work, as is not unusual, was to be in an inverse ratio to the share. Then the old man approached the future. When he was gone there was a sum of money and a big annuity for Lady Muddock; subject to that, Bob was to have two-fifths of his father's share to add to his own; the rest was to be Alice's. In that future time Alice's share would be nearly as big as Bob's; the addition of another small share would give it preponderance. Bertie's blue eye was very keen as he examined the nature of the ground he had reached and its capacities in the way of "take-off." But on going forth from Sir James' office, he could at first do little but marvel at the madness of Ashley Mead; for he knew that Ashley might have taken what he had just received, and he suspected that the great jump he had begun to meditate would have been easy to Ashley. For incontestably Alice had shown favour to Ashley — and had not shown favour to Bertie Jewett.

Bob and Bertie lunched together at Bob's club that day, the occasion allowing a little feasting and relaxation from toil. The new project touching Alice was not even distantly approached, but Bertie detected in Bob a profound dissatisfaction with Ashley Mead. Ashley's refusal seemed to Bob a slur on the business, and concerning the business he was very sensitive. He remarked with mingled asperity and satisfaction that Ashley had "dished himself all round." The "all round" indicated something besides the big block in Buckingham Palace Road, and so was significant and precious to Bertie Jewett.

"Naturally we aren't pleased," Bob said, assuming to

express the collective views of the family. "Fact is, Ashley's got a bit too much side on, you know."

Bertie Jewett laughed cautiously.

"He doesn't like the shop, I suppose!" Bob pursued sarcastically.

"I'm sorry Sir James is so much annoyed about it," remarked Bertie with apparent concern.

"He'll see what a fool he's made of himself some day," said Bob. Alice was in his mind, but went unmentioned.

Bob's opinion was shared in its entirety by Irene Kilnorton, who came over to express it to Alice as soon as the news reached her through Bowdon. Bowdon had heard it from Ashley himself, they being together on the business of the Commission. Irene was amazed to find Alice on Ashley's side and would allow no merit to her point of view.

"Oh, no, it's all wrong," she declared. "It would have been good for him in every way; it would have settled him."

"I don't want him settled," said Alice. "Oh, if you knew how tired I get of the business sometimes! Besides it will make Mr. Jewett so happy. He takes Ashley's place, you know, though father won't give him as big a share as he'd have given Ashley."

"Well, I shall tell Mr. Mead what I think of him." She paused, hesitating a moment as to whether she should say a disagreeable thing or not. But she was annoyed by Alice's attitude and decided to say it. "Not that he'll care what I say or what anybody says, except Ora Pinsent," she ended.

"Won't he?" asked Alice. She felt bound to interject something.

"What a creature she is!" cried Irene. "When I

went to see her this morning, I found her in tears. What about? Oh, I don't know. But I spoke to her sensibly."

"Poor Miss Pinsent!"

"I said, 'My dear Ora, I suppose you've done something silly and now you're sorry for yourself. For goodness' sake, though, don't ask me to be sorry for you.'"

"Had she asked you?" said Alice with a smile. Lady Kilnorton took no notice of the question.

"I suppose," she went on scornfully, "that she wanted to be petted. I wasn't going to pet her."

"I think I should have petted her. She'd be nice to pet," Alice remarked thoughtfully.

Irene seemed to lose patience.

"You don't mean to say that you and she are going to make friends?" she exclaimed. "It would be too absurd."

"Why shouldn't we? I liked her rather; at least I think so."

"I wish to goodness that husband of hers would come back and look after her. What's more, I said so to her; but she only went on crying more and more."

"You don't seem to have been very pleasant," Alice observed.

"I suppose I wasn't," Irene admitted, half in remorse. "But that sort of person does annoy me so. As I was saying to Frank, you never know where to have them. Oh, but Ora doesn't mind it from me."

"Then why did she cry more and more?"

"I don't know — unless it was because I reminded her of Mr. Fenning's existence. I think it's a good thing to do sometimes."

"Perhaps. I'm not sure, though, that I shouldn't leave it to Mr. Fenning himself."

"My dear, respectability goes for something. The man's alive, after all."

Alice knew that he was alive and in her heart knew that she was glad he was alive; but she was sorry that Ora should be made to cry by being invited to remember that he was alive. Irene was, presumably, happy with the man she had chosen; it was a good work leaning towards supererogation (if such were possible) when she took Ora's domestic relations under her wing. She hinted something of this sort.

"Oh, that's what Ashley Mead says; we all know why he says it," was Irene's mode of receiving the good advice.

A pause followed; Irene put her arm through Alice's and they began to walk about the garden. Lady Muddock was working at her embroidery at the open window; she was pronouncedly anti-Ashleyan, taking the colour of her opinions from her husband and even more from Bob.

"Where's Lord Bowdon?"

"Oh, at his tiresome Commission. He's coming to tea afterwards. I asked Mr. Mead, but he won't come."

"You'll be happier alone together."

Irene Kilnorton made no answer. She looked faintly doubtful and a trifle distressed. Presently she made a general remark.

"It's an awful thing," she said, "to undertake — to back yourself, you know — to live all your life with a man and never bore him."

"I'm sure you couldn't bore anybody."

"Frank's rather easily bored, I'm afraid."

"What nonsense! Why, you 're making yourself unhappy just in the same way that Miss Pinsent — "

"Oh, do stop talking about Ora Pinsent!" cried Irene fervently. Then she gave a sudden apprehensive glance at her companion and blushed a little. "I simply meant that men wanted such a lot of amusing," she ended.

In recording her interview with Ora, Irene had somewhat exaggerated her brutality, just as in her reflexions about her friend she exaggerated her own common-sense. Ora drove her into protective measures; she found them in declaring herself as unlike to Ora as possible. In reality common-sense held no disproportionate or disagreeable sway in her soul; if it had, she would have been entirely content with the position which now existed, and with her relations towards Bowdon. There was nothing lacking which this vaunted common-sense could demand; it was stark sentimentality, and by consequence such folly as Ora herself might harbour and drop tears about, which whispered in her heart, saying that all was nothing so long as she was not for her lover the first and only woman in the world, so long as she still felt that she had seized him, not won him, so long as the mention of Ora's name still brought a look to his face and a check to his talk. It was against herself more than against Ora that she had railed in the garden; Ora had exasperated her because she knew in herself a temper as unreasonable as Ora's; she harped on Ora's husband ill-naturedly — as she went home, she confessed she had been ill-natured — because he who was to be her husband had dreamt of being Ora's lover. Even now he dared not speak her name, he dared not see her, he could not trust himself. The pledge his promised bride had wrung from him was safe

so long as he did not see or let himself think of Ora. It was thus that Irene read his mind.

She read it rightly — to his own sorrow and remorse — rightly. He was surprised too. About taking the decisive step he had hesitated; except for circumstances rather accidentally provocative, perhaps he would not have taken it. But its virtue and power, if and when taken, he had not doubted. He had thought that by binding his actions with the chain of honour he would bind his feelings with the chain of love, that when his steps could not wander his fancy also would be tethered, that he could escape longing by abstinence, and smother a craving for one by committing himself to seem to crave for another. The maxims of that common-sense alternately lauded and reviled by Irene had told him that he would be successful in all this; he found himself successful in none of it. Ora would not go; her lure still drew him; as he sat at his Commission opposite to his secretary at the bottom of the table, he was jealous of his secretary. Thus he was restless, uncomfortable, contemptuous of himself. But he was resolute too. He was not a man who broke faith or took back his plighted word. Irene was to be his wife, was as good as his wife since his pledge was hers; he set himself to an obstinate fulfilment of his bargain, resolved that she should see in him nothing but a devoted lover, ignorant that she saw in him the thing which above all he wished to hide. Such of Ora's tears as might be apportioned to the unhappiness she caused to others were just now tolerably well justified, whatever must be thought of those which she shed on her own account. Here was Bowdon restless and contemptuous of himself, Irene bitter and ashamed, Alice with no surer, no more honest, comfort than the precarious existence of Mr. Fenning,

Sir James Muddock (Ora was no doubt partly responsible here also) grievously disappointed and hurt; while the one person who might be considered to owe her something, Mr. Bertie Jewett, was as unconscious of his debt as she of his existence; both would have been surprised to learn that they had anything in the world to do with one another. But after all most of Ora's tears were for herself. Small wonder in face of that letter from Bridgeport, Connecticut!

Bowdon wished to be married very soon; why wait, he asked; he was not as young as he had been; it would be pleasant to go to the country in August man and wife. In fine the chain of honour gave signs of being strained, and he proposed to tie up the other leg with the fetters of law; he wanted to make it more and more impossible that he should give another thought to anybody except his affianced wife. In marriage attachment becomes a habit, daily companionship strengthens it; surely that was so? And in the country, or, better still, on a yacht in mid-ocean, how could anything remind him of anybody else? But Irene would not hasten the day; she gave many reasons to countervail his; the one she did not give was a wild desire that he should be her lover before he became her husband. So on their feigned issues they discussed the matter.

"The end of July?" he suggested. It was now mid-June.

"Impossible, Frank!" she cried. "Perhaps November."

In September and October Ora would be away. Two months with Ora away, absolutely away, perhaps forgotten! Irene built hopes high on these two months.

"Not till November!" he groaned. The groan

sounded well; but it meant "Don't leave me free all that time. Tie me up before then!"

"Ashley Mead seems obstinate in his silly refusal of Sir James Muddock's offer," she said, anxious to get rid of the conflict.

"Why should he take it?" asked Bowdon. "He can get along very well without it; I don't fancy him at the counter."

"Oh, it's so evidently the sensible thing."

"I've heard you tell him yourself not to go and sell ribbons."

How exasperating are these reminders!

"I've grown wiser in ever so many ways lately," she retorted with a smile.

There was an opening for a lover here. She gave it him with a forlorn hope of its acceptance.

"Yes; but I'm not sure it's a good thing to grow so very wise," he said. Then he came and sat by her.

"You mustn't be sentimental," she warned him. "Remember we're elderly people."

He insisted on being rather sentimental; with a keen jealousy she assessed his sincerity. Sometimes he almost persuaded her; she prayed so hard to be convinced; but the wish begot no true conviction. Then she was within an ace of throwing his pledge back in his face; but still she clung to her triumph with all its alloy and all its incompleteness. She had brought him to say he loved her; could she not bring him in very truth to love? Why had Ora but to lift a finger while she put out all her strength in vain? It would not have consoled her a whit had she been reminded of Ora's tears. Like most of us, she would have chosen to win and weep.

As Bowdon strolled slowly back through the Park,

repeating how charming Irene was and how wise and fortunate he himself was, he met Ashley Mead. Ashley was swinging along at a good pace, his coat-tails flying in the wind behind him. When Bowdon first saw him he was smiling and his lips were moving, as though he were talking to himself in a pleasant vein. In response to his friend's hail, he stopped, looked at his watch, and announced that he had ten minutes to spare.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?" asked Bowdon. Ashley looked openly happy; he had an air of being content with life, of being sure that he could make something satisfactory out of it, and of having forgotten, for the time being at all events, any incidental drawbacks which might attend on it. Bowdon was smitten with an affectionate envy, and regarded the young man with a grim smile.

"Going to see a lady," said Ashley.

"You seem to be making a day of it," observed Bowdon. "In the morning you refuse a fortune, in the afternoon —"

"Oh, you've heard about the fortune, have you? I've just been down to Buckingham Palace Road, to congratulate young Jewett on being in — and myself on being out. Now, as I mentioned, Lord Bowdon —"

"Now you're on your way to see Miss Pinsent?"

"Right; you've guessed it, my lord," laughed Ashley.

"You don't seem to be ashamed of yourself."

"No, I'm not.'

"You know all about Mr. Fenning?"

"Well, as much as most of us know about him. But I don't see why I shouldn't take tea with Miss Ora Pinsent."

Bowdon turned and began to walk slowly along beside Ashley; Ashley looked at his watch again and resigned

himself to another five minutes. He owed something to Bowdon; he could spare him five of Ora's minutes; to confess the truth, moreover, he was a little early, although he had made up his mind not to be.

"Jewett 's the ablest little cad, I know," said Ashley. "At least I think he 's a cad, though I can't exactly tell you why."

"Of course he 's a cad," said Bowdon, who had dined with Bob Muddock to meet him.

"There 's no salient point you can lay hold of," mused Ashley; "it 's pervasive; you can tell it when you see him with women, you know; that brings it out. But he 's got a head on his shoulders."

"That 's more than can be said for you at this moment, my friend."

"I 'm enjoying myself very much, thank you," said Ashley with a radiant smile.

"You won't be for long," retorted Bowdon, half in sorrow, half in the involuntary malice so often aroused by the sight of gay happiness.

"Look here, you ought to be idiotic yourself just now," Ashley remonstrated. Then out came his watch again. The sight of it relieved Bowdon from the fear that he had betrayed himself; evidently he occupied no place at all in his companion's thoughts.

"Be off," he said with rueful good-nature. "Only don't say I didn't tell you."

Ashley laughed, nodded carelessly, and set off again at his round pace. But presently the round pace became intolerably slow, and he hailed a hansom. He was by way of being economical about hansoms, often pointing out how fares mounted up; but he took a good many. He was soon landed at the little house in Chelsea.

Ora was not in the room when Janet ushered him in. "I'll tell my mistress, sir," said Janet gravely, taking up a smelling-bottle which stood on Ora's little table and carrying it off with her. Blind to this subtle indication that all was not well in the house, Ashley roamed about the room. He noticed with much satisfaction his portrait in the silver frame and his roses in a vase; then he looked at the photographs on the mantel-piece; falling from these, his eyes rested for a moment in idleness on a letter which bore the postmark "Bridgeport, Conn."

"Ah, here she is!" he cried, as a step sounded and the door-handle was turned. Ora entered and closed the door; but she did not advance towards him; the smelling-bottle was in her hand.

"I wrote you a note telling you not to come," she said.

"Thank heaven I didn't get it," he answered cheerfully. "I haven't been home since the morning. You can't send me away now, can you?"

Ora walked slowly towards the sofa; he met her halfway and held out both his hands; she gave him one of hers in a listless despairing fashion.

"Oh, I know!" said he. "You 've been making yourself unhappy?"

She waved him away gently, and sat down.

"What was in the note you wrote me?" he asked, standing opposite to her.

"That I could never see you again," she said.

"Oh, come!" Ashley expostulated with a laugh. "That's rather summary, isn't it? What have I done?"

"Irene Kilnorton has been here."

"Ah! And was she disagreeable? She is sometimes — from a sense of duty or what she takes for it."

"Yes, she was disagreeable."

"If that's all—" he began, taking a step forward.

"That's not all," Ora interrupted. "Are my eyes red?"

"You've not been crying?"

"Yes, I have," she retorted, almost angrily. "Oh, why did I go with you on Sunday? Why did you make me go?"

She seemed to be conscience-stricken; he drew up a chair and sat down by her. She did not send him away now but looked at him appealingly. She had something of the air that she had worn in the inn parlour, but there joy had been mingled with her appeal; there was no joy in her eyes now.

"We didn't do much harm on Sunday," he said.

"I believe I'm preventing you doing what you ought to do, what all your friends wish for you, what would be best for you. It's just like me. I can't help it."

"What are you preventing me from doing?"

"Oh, you know. Irene says you are quite getting to like her. And she's so nice."

"But Lady Kilnorton's engaged already."

"You know I don't mean Lady Kilnorton. Don't make fun now, Ashley, don't."

Ashley leant forward suddenly and kissed her cheek.

"Oh, that's not the least use," she moaned disconsolately. "If that was all that's wanted, I know you'd do it." A mournful smile appeared on her lips. "But it only makes it worse. I've made up my mind to something."

"So have I. I've made up my mind that you're the most charming woman in the world, and that I don't care a hang about anything else."

"But you must, you know. We must be reasonable."

"Oh, I see Irene Kilnorton's been very disagreeable!"

"It's not Irene Kilnorton."

"Is it my true happiness, then?"

"No," said Ora, with another fugitive smile. "It's not exactly your true happiness."

"Well, then, I don't know what it is."

Ora was silent for a moment, her dark eyes filled with woe.

"There's a letter on the mantel-piece," she said. "Will you give it to me?"

He rose and took the letter. "This one from America?" he asked. "I say, you're not going off there, starring, are you? Because I shall have to come too, you know."

"No, I'm not going there." She took the letter out of its envelope. "Read it," she said, and handed it to him.

Somehow, before he read a word of it, the truth flashed into his mind. He looked at her and said one word: "Fenning?"

She nodded and then let her head fall back on the sofa. He read the letter carefully and jealously; that it was written by a friend's hand no doubt prevented Jack Fenning from saying more, as he himself hinted; yet the colourlessness and restraint of what he wrote were a comfort to Ashley.

He laid the letter down on the table and looked for a moment at his own picture. Ora's eyes were on him; he leant forward, took her hand, and raised it to his lips.

"Poor dear!" said he. Then he folded the letter, put it in its envelope, laid the envelope on the mantel-piece, read Bridgeport, Conn., again on the postmark, and, turning, stood looking down on her. He had not got quite home to the heart of the situation. All that day long, as it seemed to him, there had been ineffectual efforts to

stop him, to turn him from his path, and to rescue him from the impulses which were carrying him along. The Buckingham Palace Road proposal, Irene Kilnorton's hints, Alice Muddock's presence, had all been as it were suggestions to him; he had not heeded the suggestions. Now came something more categorical, something which must receive attention and insisted on being heeded. Mr. Fenning had suddenly stepped out of vagueness into definiteness, out of a sort of hypothetical into a very real and pressing form of existence. He was now located in space at Bridgeport, Connecticut; he was palpable in his written message; he became urgent for consideration by virtue of his proposal. Ashley had, in his heart, not taken Mr. Fenning very seriously; now Mr. Fenning chose to upset his attitude in that respect in a most decisive fashion. For whatever Ora decided to do, there must from now be a difference; Ashley could not doubt that. She might accept her husband's proposal; in that case her whole life was changed and his with it. She might refuse to have anything to do with it; but then would not the discarded but legitimate claimant on her affections and her society force her and him out of the compromise under which they now sheltered themselves? Either way, Jack Fenning must now be reckoned with; but which was to be the way?

With a curious sense of surviving ignorance, with an uncomfortable recognition that he was only at the beginning of the study and on the outskirts of a knowledge of the woman whom he already loved and held nearest to him of anybody in the world, Ashley discovered that he had no idea in which way Ora would face the situation, what would be her temper, or what her decision. For the first time in their acquaintance a flash of discomfort, almost of apprehension, shot across his mind.

Was she as alien, as foreign, as diverse from him as that? But he would not admit the feeling, would not have it or recognise it; it was absurd, he told himself, to expect to foresee her choice, when he knew so little of the factors which must decide it. Did he know Fenning, had he been privy to their married life? Not in her but in the nature of the case lay the puzzle. He dismissed his doubt and leant down towards the sad beautiful face beside him.

"Well, dear?" he asked, very gently.

"I'm going to tell him to come," said she.

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CHAPTER IX

RENUNCIATION: A DRAMA

THE words in which Ora declared her intention of recalling Jack Fenning to her side and of taking up again the burden of married life sounded like the statement of a firm, unalterable, and independent resolution; after them it seemed as though Ashley had only to bow his head and go his ways; his task would be, if not easy, yet plain and simple. But with the brave sound came the appealing glance; the words were uttered more like a prayer than a decree. She had thrown herself on his mercy in the inn parlour on the Sunday; she appeared to throw herself on his mercy again now, and in reality to await his determination rather than announce her own. But she was eager to win from him the verdict that she suggested; she was not hoping for a refusal while she satisfied appearances by asking. The appeal was full of fear and doubt, but it was genuine and sincere. Her eyes followed him as he walked to the window and as he came back and stood again before her; she watched the struggle in him with anxiety. Once she smiled faintly as though to show her understanding and her sympathy with what was passing in his mind. "I feel all that too," she seemed to say.

"Have you quite made up your mind?" he asked her at last. "You 've realised what it means? I don't know him, of course, and you do. Well, can you do it?"

"I must do it. I ought to do it," she said pathetically. "You know I ought to do it."

He shrugged his shoulders; probably she was right there, unless Jack Fenning were a much worse calamity than he had any good reason for supposing; certainly everybody would hold her right, everybody who had not queer theories, at least.

"You must help me," she said. He was silent. She rose and came to stand by him, speaking to him in a low whisper. "Yes, you must help me, you must make me able to do it. I can do it if you help me, Ashley. It is right, you know."

A hint of amusement shewed itself in his face.

"Perhaps, but I shouldn't have thought I could help you much," he said. "Unless you mean by going away and staying away?"

"Oh, no, no," she cried in terror. "You mustn't go away, you mustn't leave me alone, I should die if you did that now. It's a thing for both of us to do; we must help one another. We shall make one another stronger. Don't you see what I mean? You won't go?"

He had not fathomed her mood yet, bat only one answer to her prayer was possible.

"I won't go as long as you want me," he said.

"You promise? You promise me that?" she insisted.

"Yes, I promise," he assured her with another smile.

"And you'll make it easy for me?" She, in her turn, smiled a moment. "I mean you won't make it too difficult? I must be good, you must let me be good. Some people say you're happy when you're good. I wonder! I shall be very miserable, I know."

The tears were standing in her eyes; she looked indeed very miserable; he kissed her.

"Yes," she murmured, as though he had told her in words that he pitied her very much; she preserved that childlike sort of attitude towards caresses; to Ashley it

seemed to make kissing her almost meritorious. She saw no inconsistency between accepting his kisses and holding to her heroic resolution; it seemed almost as though she must be kissed to enable her to hold to her resolution; it was the sympathy, or even the commendation, without which her virtue could not stand.

"I can do it," she said plaintively. Then she drew herself up a little. "Yes, I can," she repeated proudly, "I 'm sure I can. We can do what we ought, if we try. Oh, but how I shall hate it! If only it had come a little sooner — before— before our Sunday! It wouldn't have been so bad, then."

"No, it wouldn't," he said.

"Poor Ashley!" she said, pressing his hand. "Will it be very hard for you?"

He answered with the shamefaced brevity and reserve with which men, trained as he had been, confess to emotion.

"I shan't like it, naturally."

"But you must be strong too," she urged. "We must make each other strong." She returned with evident comfort to this idea of their helping one another; they were to fight as allies, in a joint battle, not each to support a solitary unaided struggle. To most people it would have seemed that they would make one another weak. Ora was sure of the contrary; they would make one another strong, support one another against temptation, and applaud one another's successes. She could be good, could be even heroic, could perform miracles of duty and resignation, if she had the help of Ashley's sympathy and the comfort of his presence. And he would feel the same, she thought; she could soften the trial to which she was obliged to subject him; she could console him; her tender grief and her love,

ardent while renouncing, would inspire him to the task of duty. She grew eager as this idea took shape in her mind; she pressed it on him, anxious to make him see it in the aspect in which she saw it, to understand the truth and to appreciate the beauty that lay in it. She was sure it was true. It surprised her to find this beauty also in it. But if they separated now, cut themselves adrift from one another, and went off their different ways, all that drew her in the picture would be destroyed, and she would be left without the balm of its melancholy sweetness. She tried by every means in her power to enlist him on her side and make him look at the question as she looked at it.

Always obedient to her pleading orders, never able openly to reject what she prayed him to accept, Ashley feigned to fall in with an idea which his clearsightedness shewed very much in its real colours and traced to its true origin. It had begun in the instinctive desire not to lose him yet, to put off the day of sacrifice, to reconcile, so far as might be possible, two inconsistent courses, to pay duty its lawful tribute and yet keep a secret dole for the rebel emotion which she loved. Up to this point she was on ground common enough, and did only what many men and women seek and strive to do. Her individual nature shewed itself in the next step, when the idea that she had made began to attract her, to grow beautiful, to shape itself into a picture of renunciatory passion, moving and appealing in her eyes. But there must be other eyes; he too must see; by interchange of glances they must share and heighten their appreciation of what they were engaged on. Her morality, her effort to be, as she put it, good, must not only be liberally touched by emotion; it must be supported and stimulated by sympathetic applause. Reluctantly and almost with a sense

of ungenerousness, as though he were criticising her ill-naturedly, he found himself applying to her the terms of her own art, beginning to see her in effective scenes, to detect an element of the theatrical in her mood. This notion came to him without bringing with it any repugnance and without making him impute to her any insincerity. She was sincere enough, indeed absolutely engrossed in her emotion and in the picture her emotion made. But the sincerity was more of emotion than of purpose, and the emotion demanded applause for the splendid feat of self-abnegation which it was to enable her and him to achieve. He was quite incapable of casting this glamour round his own share in the matter, but he strove to feel and perceive it in hers as she pleaded softly with him that he should not leave her to struggle in grim solitude. And he was glad of any excuse for not leaving her.

"I can't think yet of what it will be like when he 's come," she said. "I mustn't think of that, or — or I couldn't go on. I must just do it now; that 's what we 've got to do, isn't it? We must get it done, Ashley, and leave all the rest. We must just do what 's right without looking beyond it."

"There 's no particular good in looking forward," he admitted ruefully. "You 're quite clear about it?"

"Oh, yes, aren't you? I 'm sure you are." She looked at him apprehensively. "You mustn't turn against me. I can be strong with you to help me; I couldn't be strong against you." Her voice fell even lower. "Not for an hour," she ended in a whisper.

Again she threw herself on his mercy; again he could not fail her or be deaf to her prayer.

"If you think it right, I can say nothing against it," he said.

"No. You wouldn't be happy if you did; I mean if you did persuade me to anything else. I know there aren't many men like you, capable of doing what you're going to do for me. But you can do it."

He perceived the glamour encircling him now as well as her; quarrelling with his own words, still he said to himself that his part also was to be an effective one; she was liberal to him and shewed no desire to occupy all the stage; her eyes would be as much for him as for herself.

"And because you're strong, I can be strong," she went on. "We shall both be glad afterwards, shan't we?"

"Let's rest in the consciousness of virtue, and never mind the gladness," he suggested.

Ora discarded the gladness almost eagerly.

"Yes," she said. "Because we shall both be terribly unhappy. We've got to face that. We aren't doing it blindly. We know what it means."

He doubted greatly whether she knew what it meant; she could not realise its meaning so long as she refused to look forward or to consider the actual state of things when Jack Fenning had arrived, so long as she preferred to concentrate all her gaze on the drama of renunciation which was to precede and bring about his coming. But in all this there was only an added pathos to him, a stronger appeal to his compassion, and an insuperable difficulty in the way of even trying to make her understand; such an attempt seemed brutal in his eyes. He could comfort her now; he could not tell her that when the moving scene ended with the entrance of Jack Fenning he would be able to comfort her no more.

The same mood which prevented her from looking forward made her reluctant to talk of her husband as he actually was. Under pressure of Ashley's questions she

told him that she had begun by loving Jack and had gone on liking him for some little while; but that he bore poverty badly and yet was indolent; that he often neglected her and sometimes had been unkind; that he was very extravagant, got into terrible money difficulties, and had been known to turn to the bottle for relief from his self-created troubles. But she became very distressed with the subject and obviously preferred to leave Jack Fenning vague, to keep him to the part of a husband in the abstract. This was all the drama needed — a husband accepted in duty but no longer loved or desired; the personal characteristics or peculiarities of the particular husband were unessential and unimportant. Ashley was surprised to find how little he had learnt about Mr. Fenning. But he was learning more about Mr. Fenning's wife.

"It's not what he is," urged Ora, "it's what we've got to do."

By now Ashley felt irrevocably coupled with her in a common task; and to him at least the precise character of the husband was not important. They were to act on the high plane of duty; Jack's past misdeeds or present defects were to be of no moment except in so far as they might intensify the struggle and enhance the beauty of renunciation. Ashley was so far infected with her spirit that he was glad to be left with a number of impressions of Jack Fenning all vaguely unfavourable.

"Nothing will ever alter or spoil the memory of our Sunday," she said. "It'll be there always, the one sweet and perfect thing in life. I think we shall find it even more perfect because of what we're going to do. I shall think about it every day as long as I live. I think it helps to have been happy just once, don't you? It'll never be as if we hadn't known we loved one another."

With the dismissal of the topic of Jack Fenning's character and the acceptance of the position that they were not to look forward beyond the act of renunciation, Ora had grown composed, cheerful, and at moments almost gay. Already she seemed to have triumphed in her struggle, or their struggle as she always called it; already she was minded to exchange congratulations with her ally. Her mere presence was such a charm to him as to win him to happiness, even while they were agreeing that happiness was impossible; the sense of loss, of deprivation, and of emptiness was postponed and could not assert itself while she moved before his eyes in the variety of her beauty and grace. Though he could accord but a very half-hearted adhesion to the scheme she had planned, again he welcomed it, because for the time at least it left her to him; nor could he be altogether sorrowful when she made her great and confessed love for him the basis on which the whole plan rested, the postulate that gave to the drama all its point and to the sacrifice all its merit. If she were triumphing in renunciation, he triumphed in a victory no less great, and hardly less sweet because the fruits of it were denied to him, because it was to rank as a memory, and not to become a perpetual joy. At least she loved him, trusted him, depended on him; he was to her more than any man; he was her choice. He would not have changed parts with Jack Fenning although he had to go out of her life and Jack was coming into it again. Surely to be desired is more than to possess?

"I suppose people suspect about us," she said. "I'm sure Irene does, and I think Miss Muddock does. But we've nothing to be ashamed of; we can't help loving one another and we're going to do right." She paused a moment, and then, looking at him with a timid smile,

added, "How awfully surprised everybody will be when they hear that Jack's coming back! I think a lot of them hardly believed in him."

No doubt she divined accurately the nature of a considerable body of opinion.

"I daresay not," said Ashley. "You'll tell people what's going to happen?"

"Just my friends. It would look so odd if he came without any warning."

It could not be denied that she was interested in thinking of the effect which her news would create. She saw herself telling it to people.

"Of course I shall announce it as if it was the most ordinary thing," she went on. "You must do the same; say I told you about it. They'll be rather puzzled, won't they?"

"Oh, my dear!" said he, half laughing, half groaning, as he took her hand for a moment and pressed it lightly. "Yes, I daresay they'll be puzzled," he added with a rueful smile.

"We mustn't shew we notice anything of that sort," pursued Ora. "Nobody must see what it is we're really doing. They won't know anything about it." Her eyes fixed themselves on his. "I daresay they'll suspect," she ended. "We can't help that, can we?"

"We must keep our own counsel."

"Yes. If they like to talk, they must, that's all."

She had more to say of this secret of theirs, talked about, guessed at, canvassed, but not fully understood and never betrayed; it was to be something exclusively their own, hidden and sacred, a memory for ever between them, a puzzle to all the rest of the world.

"I daresay they'll guess that we care for one another," she said, "but they'll never know the whole truth. I

expect they wouldn't believe in it if they did. They wouldn't think we could do what we 're going to."

Not till he prepared to go did her sorrow and desolation again become acutely felt. She held his arms and prayed him not to leave her.

"You must rest a little while and eat something before you go to the theatre," he reminded her.

"No, no, don't leave me. Stay with me, do stay with me. Why can't I always have you with me? Why shouldn't I? How cruel it is!" She was almost sobbing. "Ashley, don't go," she whispered.

"Well, I won't go," he said. "I 'll stay and dine with you and take you to the theatre."

"And fetch me home afterwards?"

"No, I don't think I 'll do that as well."

"Why not?" she asked resentfully. Ashley shook his head. After a long look at him Ora sighed deeply. "I suppose you 'd better not," she admitted. "But you 'll stay now, won't you?" She ran across to the bell and rang it; her tone was gay as she told Janet that Mr. Mead would dine with her; between being left now and being left two hours hence a gulf of difference yawned.

"I 'm afraid there 's not much dinner, ma'am," said Janet in a discouraging, perhaps a disapproving, way.

"Oh, you won't mind that, will you?" she cried to Ashley, and when Janet went out she sighed, "It 's so nice to have you." His smile had mockery in it as well as love. "It 's for such a little while too," she went on. "Presently I shan't have you at all."

The little meal that they took together — Ashley ignoring an engagement to dine with friends, Ora seeming unmindful of things much harder to forget — was not a sorrowful feast. The shadow of the great renuncia-

tion did not eclipse Ora's gaiety, but tempered it with a soft tenderness. None of her many phases had charmed her friend more; never had she seemed stronger in her claim on his service, more irresistible in the weakness with which she rested her life on his. His taste, his theoretical taste, had not been for women of this type, but rather, as he used to put it, for a woman with a backbone, a woman like Alice Muddock; theoretical preferences exist to be overthrown.

The unpretentious "jobbed" victoria was waiting at the door, and at last Ora made up her mind to start. It was but a little after seven, the streets were still light and full. The beginning of the renunciation might have seemed a strange one to the passer-by who recognised the occupants of the victoria. Many looked at Ora, thinking they had seen her before; some certainly knew her, some also knew Ashley. In reply to a not very serious expostulation from her companion Ora declared that it did not matter if people gossipped a little, because her announcement would put an end to it all directly; meanwhile shouldn't they enjoy themselves while they could? "If you hadn't taken me to the theatre to-night, I could never have got there," she declared with conviction. Ashley knew quite well that this was not literal truth and that she would have gone anyhow; whatever had happened to her, her instinct would have taken her; but the untruth had a truth in it and she thought it all true. It was an instance of the way in which she had put herself in his hands, had told him what she wanted him to do with her, and was now leaving him to do it. He had, in a slang phrase which came into his mind, "to see her through;" he had to ensure that the great renunciation should be properly carried out. It was consoling, although no doubt some-

what whimsical, that the renunciation should seem to excuse what but for it would have been condemned as an imprudence, and, while dooming them to ultimate separation, should excuse or justify them in being as much together as they could in the present. It was "only for a little while;" the coming of Jack Fenning would end their pleasant hours and silence those who cavilled at them. The consciousness of their approaching virtue bred in Ora, and even in Ashley to some degree, both a sense of security and a tendency to recklessness; it seemed as though they had had no reason to fear either themselves or other people.

"You might come and fetch me afterwards," she said coaxingly.

But here he stood firm and repeated his refusal. She seemed surprised and a little hurt. But at the moment Babba Flint lifted his hat and bowed from the pavement with much *empressement.*

"The story of our drive will be half over London by midnight," said Ashley.

"It doesn't matter now," she assured him, lightly touching his hand.

"Shall you write soon?" he asked.

"Yes, to-morrow," she said. An idea seemed to strike her. "Hadn't I better telegraph?" she asked.

"Wouldn't that look unnecessarily eager?" he suggested. The notion of a telegram stirred a jealousy, not of any real fact, but of the impression that it might convey to Mr. Fenning. He did not wish Jack Fenning to suppose that his home-coming was joyously awaited. Ora had been caught with the attraction of a telegram; it would emphasise the renunciation; but she understood the objection.

"No," she said, "I'd better write. Because I shall

have to explain the reasons for what I 'm doing and tell him how — how we 're to be to one another." She glanced at Ashley. He was looking straight in front of him. "I 'll shew you the letter," she said in a low voice.

"I don't want to see the letter; I won't see it," he returned.

"Oh, it is hard for both of us!" she sighed. "But you know, dear, you know so well what you are to me; nobody ever has been or ever will be what you are. Won't you see the letter?"

"No, I won't see the letter."

Ora was disappointed; she would have liked sympathy and appreciation for the letter. Since these were not to be had, she determined to send quite a short business-like letter.

"No," she said. "I won't enter on any sort of discussion. I shall just tell him that I don't feel justified in refusing him leave to come. That 'll be best; afterwards we must be guided by circumstances."

The "we" amused Ashley, for undoubtedly it served to couple Ora and himself, not Ora and her husband; from time to time he awoke for a moment to the queer humour of the situation.

"We must see how he behaves himself," he said, — smiling.

"Yes," she assented gravely, but a moment later, seeing his amusement, she broke into a responsive laugh, "I know why you 're smiling," she said with a little nod, "but it is like that, isn't it?"

Perhaps for the time it was, but it was very clear to him that it could not go on being. Professing to think of nothing but the renunciation, she had begun to construct an entirely impossible fabric of life on the basis of it. In this fabric Ashley played a large part; but no

fabric could stand in which both he and Jack Fenning played large parts; and Jack's part was necessarily large in any fabric built with the renunciation for its corner-stone. Else where was the renunciation, where its virtue and its beauty?

To see the impossibility of a situation and its necessary tendency to run into an *impasse* is logically the forerunner to taking some step to end it. Since, however, logic is but one of several equal combatants in human hearts, men often do not act in accordance with its rules. They wait to have the situation ended for them from without; a sort of fatalism gains sway over them and is intensified by every growth of the difficulty in which they find themselves. Unconvinced by Ora's scheme and not thoroughly in harmony with her mood, Ashley acted as though the one satisfied and the other entirely dominated him. When they parted at the theatre door there were two understandings arrived at between them, both suggested by her, both accepted obediently by him. One was that he should not fail to come and see her next day, and the day after, and the day following on that; to this he pledged himself under sanction of his promise to be her ally in the struggle and not to forsake her. The other arrangement was that the letter of recall should be written and despatched to Jack Fenning within twenty-four hours. Ora reluctantly agreed that Ashley should not have any hand in its composition or even see it before it was sent, but she was sure that she not only must but also ought to render to him a very clear and full account of all that it did and did not contain.

"Because," she said, as she gave him her hand in unwilling farewell, "we're going to fight this battle together, aren't we?" He nodded. "I couldn't fight

it without you, indeed I couldn't," were the last words she spoke to him; they came with all the added force of the last imploring look from her eyes and the last pleading smile on her lips.

Then the theatre swallowed her up, and he was left to walk home, to remember his neglected engagement, to telegraph excuses in regard to it, then speedily again to forget it, and to spend an evening in which despair, wonder, tenderness, and amusement each had their turn with him. He had not lost her yet, but he must lose her; this idea of hers was absurd, ludicrous, impossible, yet it was also sweet, persuasive, above all expressive of her in her mingled power and weakness. It was herself; and from it, therefore, he could no more escape than he could from her.

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CHAPTER X

THE LICENCE OF VIRTUE

IRENE KILNORTON was in a state of pardonable irritation; just now she often inclined to irritation, but the immediate cause of this fit and its sufficient excuse lay in Babba Flint's behaviour. If only he could have believed it, he always annoyed her; but it was outrageous beyond the common to come on her "At Home" day, and openly scout her most interesting, most exciting, most comforting piece of news. He stuck his glass in his eye, stared through it an instant, and dropped it with an air of contemptuous incredulity.

"She told me herself," said Irene angrily. "I suppose that's pretty good authority."

"The very worst," retorted Babba calmly. "She's just the person who has an interest in spreading the idea. Mind you, I don't say he doesn't exist; I reserve judgment as to that because I'm aware that he used to. But I do say he won't turn up, and I'm willing to take any reasonable bet on the subject. In fact the whole thing is as plain as a pikestaff."

"What whole thing?" She spoke low, she did not want the rest to hear.

Babba spread his hands in a deprecating toleration for his hostess' density.

"She's everywhere with Mead," he said. "Drives to the theatre with him, you know, walks with him, talks about him."

"That doesn't explain anything, even if it's true."

"Doesn't it? When you're being indiscreet, lay emphasis on your husband. That's the standing rule, Lady Kilnorton. You'll see; when she gets tired of Mead, we shall hear no more of Jack Fenning."

Irene looked at him resentfully; he was abominably confident. And after all Ora was a strange being; in spite of their friendship, still outside her comprehension and not reducible to her formulas.

"But she's full of his coming," she expostulated. "She's — well, not exactly glad, I suppose — "

"I should suppose not," smiled Babba.

"But quite excited about it. And Mr. Mead knows he's coming too."

"No doubt Mead says he knows he's coming." Babba had once served his articles to a solicitor, and reminiscences of the rules of evidence and the value of testimony hung about him.

"Well, I believe he'll come," Irene declared with external firmness and an internal faintness.

"He won't, you'll see," returned Babba placidly.

Desiring an end to this vexatious conversation, Irene cast her eyes round her guests who were engaged in drinking tea and making talk to one another. Her glance detached Bowdon from his attendance on Minna Soames and brought him to her side; Babba, however, did not move away.

"The whole thing is very likely a despairing effort of Miss Pinsent's conscience," he said. "How are you, Lord Bowdon?"

"Ah, Babba, you here? Gossipping as usual, I see."

"He says Ora's husband won't come."

"Well, he doesn't know anything about it."

"I'll take six to four," said Babba eagerly.

"I don't think I care to bet about it," said Bowdon.

"Ah, I expect not!" For Babba the only possible reason against making any bet in the world was the fear of losing it.

"Do go and talk to Minna Soames," Irene implored him. "She'll be ready enough to disbelieve anything creditable about poor Ora." Babba smiled knowingly and began to edge away. Bowdon sat down by his *fiancée*. "I do believe it, you know," she said, turning to him. Babba looked back with a derisive smile.

"Why should she say it, if it's not true?" asked Irene, addressing Bowdon and pointedly ignoring Babba.

"Oh, no doubt it's true," said Bowdon. "Why shouldn't it be true?"

Babba had put forward the constant companionship of Ora and Ashley Mead at once as evidence that the report was not true and as the explanation of its being circulated; Irene was inclined to attribute to it only the first of these functions.

"She goes on very oddly, if it is," she murmured. "But then she is odd."

"It's true, depend upon it," said Bowdon.

His solid persistence both comforted and exasperated her. She desired to think the report true, but she did not wish him to accept it merely in the unquestioning loyalty to Ora Pinsent which his tone implied. A thing was not true simply because Ora chose to say it; men lose all their common-sense where a woman is concerned; so say women themselves; so said Irene Kilnorton.

"What impresses me," she went on, "is that Ashley Mead told me."

"I suppose he got his information from her."

"Of course; but he can judge." She paused and added, "It's a very good thing, if it is true."

"Is it?" asked Bowdon. The question was an almost naked dissent.

Irene looked at him severely.

"It seems to me," she observed, "that men ought to pretend to approve of respectability. One doesn't ask them to be respectable."

"The man's a scamp, according to all accounts."

"He's her husband."

"He'll make her miserable, and take her money, and so on."

"No doubt his arrival will be inconvenient in a good many ways," Irene allowed herself to remark with significant emphasis. She had, she declared, no patience with the way men looked at such things; the man was the woman's husband after all. She found growing in her a strong disposition to champion Mr. Fenning's cause through thick and thin. "We don't know his version of the case," she reminded Bowdon after a pause.

"Oh, that's true, of course," he conceded with what she felt was an empty show of fairness. In reality he had prejudged the case and condemned the absent and unheard defendant. That was because he was a man and Ora Pinsent good-looking; a habit regrettable in men generally becomes exasperating, almost insulting, in one's own lover, especially with circumstances of a peculiar nature existing in the past and still very vivid in memory.

One way in which the news affected Bowdon he had allowed Irene to perceive; he was not at his ease as to how Ora would fare, and there was a touch of jealousy in his picture of Mr. Fenning's probable conduct. But

he was conscious also of thankfulness that he had escaped from the sort of position in which he might have been placed had he yielded to his impulse, and in which, so far as he saw, Ashley Mead was now involved. His dignity would not have suffered him to enter into any rivalry with Fenning, while to leave the field clear to Fenning would have been a sacrifice hard to make. From this evil fortune the woman by him had rescued him, or enabled him to rescue himself, and he was full of gratitude to her; while she was still resenting the jealousy which he had betrayed with regard to Ora Pinsent, he surprised her by some whispered words of more tenderness than he commonly used and by a look which sent new hope through her. Suddenly she grasped that this event might do what she had not been able to do, might reconcile him to what was, gradually wean him wholly from the thought of what might have been, and in the end render him to her entirely her own in heart and soul. She would be very grateful to Jack Fenning if he accomplished that for her; he would have remade her life.

"You're quite gallant to-day," she whispered with a blush and a glad sparkle in her eyes. "We were very nearly quarrelling just now, weren't we?" she asked with a bright smile.

"We'll never be nearer, my dear," he answered; he had the most intense desire to please her.

"And about this Fenning man! Imagine!" she whispered in scornful amusement.

Bowdon went off to the House and the other guests took their leave. When all had gone Alice Muddock arrived; the two ladies had arranged to dine and spend a quiet hour together before they went to the parties for which they were engaged. When they were left

alone Alice, with a sigh, told her friend that Queen's Gate seemed like a refuge.

"We've been so uncomfortable at home the last few days," she explained. "At least I've found it very uncomfortable. You know about Ashley and the business? Well, father's furious with him about it, so's Bob, so's my stepmother, of course. And then—" She paused as though in hesitation.

"Well, and then?" asked Irene Kilnorton.

"Bob's brought home a lot of gossip about him from the club. Has Mr. Flint been here?" Lady Kilnorton nodded tragically. "He told Bob something, and father's furious about that too. So he won't hear Ashley's name mentioned, and takes his revenge by having Bertie Jewett always in the house. And I don't think I much like Bertie Jewett, not every day anyhow."

"I've only just made his acquaintance — through your brother."

"Oh, he's just what he would be; it's not his fault, you know." She began to laugh. "He pays me marked attentions."

"The Industrious Apprentice!" said Irene with a nod. "Ashley's the idle one."

"It's all very absurd and very tiresome." She had risen and walked across the room. From the other end of it she asked abruptly, "What do they say about him and Miss Pinsent?"

"Oh, my dear, what don't they say about everybody?"

"I don't believe it. I like her; and of course I like him."

"And I expect they like one another, so it's all harmonious," said Irene; but she repented the next moment. "I don't believe anything bad. But he's very silly about her. It'll all pass." After a moment,

thanks to the new hope in her, she added a courageous generalisation. "Such nonsense never lasts long," she said. Then she looked at Alice, and it struck her suddenly that Alice would have referred to the news about Jack Fenning, had she known it; it seemed odd that everybody should not have heard of a subject so rich in interest.

"You know about Mr. Fenning?" she asked.

"Mr — ? Oh, yes! You mean Miss Pinsent's husband? I know she has a husband, of course."

Then she did not know the new development.

"I 've got a bit of news for you," said Irene luxuriously. "Guess."

"I won't guess even to please you. I hate guessing."

"Well, Mr. Fenning 's coming home. I 'll tell you all about it."

Beyond the bare fact there was in reality very little to tell, but the fact was capable of being clothed with so much meaning, of being invested with so many attendant possibilities, of taking on such various colours, that it seemed in itself a budget of news. Alice did justice to its claims; she was undeniably interested; the two found themselves talking it over in a vein which prevented them from pretending to one another that they were not both excited about it. They felt like allies who rejoiced together at the coming of a reinforcement. Irene's satisfaction was open and declared; Alice was more reticent and inclined to thoughtfulness. But even as an abstract existence on the other side of the world Mr. Fenning had comforted her; his virtue as a balm was endlessly multiplied by the prospect of his arrival in concrete form and flesh.

"The men amuse me," said Irene loftily. "They 're

all pitying Ora; they don't seem to give a thought to poor Mr. Fenning."

"Have you seen Ashley since — since the news came?"

"Yes, but only for a minute. He mentioned it as certain, but quite indifferently. Of course he'd pretend to be indifferent."

"I suppose so," said Alice. "Perhaps he is really."

"How can he be?"

"Perhaps he means to take no notice of Mr. Fenning."

"My dearest Alice!" cried Irene. "You absolutely shock me. Besides it isn't like that at all. Ora's most excited about his coming. I can't make them out, though."

They fell to debating the constant companionship; the drive to the theatre, improved by Babba Flint's tongue into an invariable habit, was a puzzle, fitting very badly with an excited interest in Mr. Fenning's return. From these unprofitable enquiries they agreed to retreat to the solid basis of hope which the reappearance of the husband gave; on that they congratulated one another.

Common danger breeds candour; common good fortune breeds candour; finally, a *tête-à-tête* dinner breeds candour. By the time they reached the sweets Irene Kilnorton, in the course of a demonstration that Ashley must and would get over his infatuation, that such nonsense never lasted, and that Mr. Fenning's return would put a summary end to anything of the sort, had confided to her friend that just for a little while Lord Bowdon had shewn signs of an inclination to hover round the same perilous flame. She was able to reveal the secret now, because she was so full of hope that it

was all a thing of the past; she found her confidence itself strengthened by a bold assertion of it.

"Frank 's got over it pretty quickly, anyhow," she ended with a secure laugh.

Alice was not so expansive, she had not victory to justify her; she said nothing in words, but when Irene accompanied her "It 'll all come right, dear, you 'll see," with a squeeze of the hand, she blushed and smiled, returned the squeeze, and kissed her friend on the first convenient opportunity. For all practical purposes the confession was complete, and the alliance sealed anew, — with the addition of a third, involuntary, and unconscious member in the person of Mr. Jack Fenning of Bridgeport, Connecticut.

At Alice's party Ashley Mead appeared. Lady Muddock made timid efforts to avoid him and ludicrously timid attempts to snub him. He laughed at both, and insisted on talking to her with great cordiality for ten minutes before he carried Alice off to supper. Her he treated with even more than his usual friendly intimacy; he surprised her by displaying very high spirits. All went well with him, it seemed; he had been paid fine compliments on his work as secretary to the Commission; his acceptance of the post promised to help rather than hinder him at the Bar; he had received a suggestion that he should try his hand at a couple of articles a week for an important journal.

"It 's all quite wrong, of course," he said, laughing. "After refusing Buckingham Palace Road, I ought to be reduced to starvation and have to crawl back like the Prodigal Son. But the course of events is terribly unregenerate; it 's always missing the moral. The world isn't very moral, left to itself."

Alice loved him in this mood of gaiety; her own se-

rious and sober disposition found relief in it. But she liked it more as a flower of talk than as a living rule of action.

"I'm so glad," she said, with full sincerity. "Of course I knew that your getting on was only a matter of time."

"I really believe," he said, "that I've at last just got the knife between the outside edges of the oyster shell. I hope it's a good oyster inside, though!"

"It's sure to be a good one for you," was her answer. She could not help giving him that sort of answer; if it betrayed her, she must bear the betrayal. She gave him the answer even now, when he was under the ban of heavy disapproval on account of Ora Pinsent. But she wondered to find him so gay, in a state of such contentment with the world, and of such interest in it. Bearing in mind what she now knew, she would not have marvelled to find him in deepest depression or even in a hardly controlled despair. He looked down in her face with a merry laugh and some trifling joke which was only an excuse for it; his eyes dwelt on her face, apparently in a frank enjoyment of what he found there. But what could he, who looked daily on the face of Ora Pinsent, find there? His pleasure was absurd, she told herself, but it won upon her; at least she was not boring him; for the moment anyhow he was not wishing himself somewhere else. Here was a transient triumph over the lady with whom the gossips linked his name; to Alice's modesty it was much to make forgotten in absence one in whose presence she herself must have been at once forgotten.

He began to flirt with her; he had done the same thing before, now and then, by way of a change she supposed, perhaps lest their friendship should sink too far

into the brotherly-sisterly state. She desired this state less than he, but his deviations from it brought her pleasure alloyed with pain. Indeed she could not, as she admitted, quite understand flirtation; had it been all pretence she could have judged and would have condemned, but a thing so largely made up of pretence, and yet redeemed from mere pretence by a genuineness of the moment's mood, puzzled her. Fretfully aware of a serious bent in herself, of a temper perilously near to a dull literalness, she always tried to answer in kind when he, or indeed anybody else, offered to engage in the game with her. When it was Ashley she used to abandon herself, so far as her nature allowed her, to the present pleasure, but never got rid of the twofold feeling that he did not mean what he said and that he ought to mean more than he said. That he should flirt with her now was especially strange. She did not do him the injustice of supposing that he was employing her merely in order to throw the critics of his relations with Ora off the scent. She came nearer to the truth in concluding that the flirtation, like the rest of his bearing, was merely an outcome of general good-humour. The puzzle was postponed only one stage; how could he be in good-humour, how did he contrive to rejoice in his life and exult in it? He was in love with Ora Pinsent; such a love was hopeless if not disastrous, disastrous if not hopeless; in any aspect that she could perceive it was irremediably tragic. But Ashley Mead was radiant.

The idea which Irene Kilnorton said absolutely shocked her recurred as a possible explanation; did he mean to take no notice of Mr. Fenning? An alarmed horror filled her; her love and her moral code joined in an urgent protest. Such a thing would mean degradation for him, it might mean ruin or something like it for his

career; besides that, it must mean an end of him so far as she was concerned; it would set an impenetrable insurmountable barrier between them. But how did men approach a determination like that? Surely through sorrow, gloom, and despair? Ah, but there was sometimes a mad desperate gaiety that went with and covered such a resolve. She looked at him with a sudden distress that showed itself in her eyes and parted lips. The change in her caught his notice, but she was too engrossed with her fear to feel embarrassment or false shame. He broke off what he was saying to ask, "Why, what 's the matter, Alice? Have you seen a ghost drinking champagne?"

"They say you 're being very foolish," she answered in a low steady voice, not moving her eyes from his face. "Oh, Ashley, you 're not going to — to do anything mad?"

A pause followed; presently he looked at her and said, with seeming surprise,

"Have you been thinking of that all the time?"

"No, only just now."

"Why? I mean, what made you think of it?"

"I 've heard things. And you were so — I can't say what I mean! When people are very gay and in great spirits, and so on, don't the Scotch say they 're fey, and that something will happen to them?"

"Most nations have said so," he answered lightly; but a slight frown came on his brow, as he added, "So I 'm fey, am I?" His laugh was a little bitter.

"I 've no right to speak to you."

"Every right." Whatever was in his face, there was neither offence nor resentment. "Only it 's not worth your while to bother," he went on.

"You know I think it is," she answered with simple directness.

He looked at her wistfully; for a moment there came to him such a mood as had arrested Bowdon's steps and availed to turn his feet into a new path. But Ashley's temper was not the same. He did not say that because this path was the best it should be his, be the other ever so attractive; he admitted with a sigh that the other was more attractive, nay, was irresistible, and held on his way straight to it.

"You 're one of the best people in the world, Alice," he said. And he added, smiling, "Don't believe all you hear. Everybody is behaving very properly."

"That 's not the Kensington Palace Gardens' opinion."

"I'm afraid I 'm damned for ever in Sir James' eyes. Bertie Jewett reigns in my stead."

"Yes, that 's it exactly," she agreed.

He shrugged his shoulders petulantly. "So be it," said he, with contemptuous resignation. "Oh, I don't mean that I think you look at it like that," he added an instant later.

She wanted to speak to him about what Irene Kilnorton had told her; her desire was to hear from his own lips that he did not mean to take no notice of Mr. Fenning. The subject was difficult of approach, embarrassed by conventionalities and forbidden by her consciousness of a personal interest. Before she could find any way of attacking it indirectly, Ashley began to talk again fluently and merrily, and this mood lasted until she parted from him; she had no further chance of getting inside his guard, and went home, wondering still at his high spirits. On the whole she had drawn comfort from the evening. She decided to reject that far-fetched idea which called him fey because he was merry, and to repose on two solid facts: the first being that Ashley did not seem heart-broken, the second that Mr. Fenning was

coming back to his wife. Among any people whom she could measure or understand, these two facts would have been of high importance, enough in themselves to determine the issue. But she felt about Ashley something of the same ignorance which paralysed all her efforts to understand Ora Pinsent or to forecast the actions of that gifted but bewildering lady. Certainly she would have been no more in her intellectual depth had she understood that the doings which were setting Babba Flint's tongue and all the other tongues a-wagging were simply a natural outcome and almost an integral part of a great scheme of renunciation.

She could not be blamed. Ashley Mead himself was hardly less at a loss on the occasions when he allowed himself to take thought concerning the matter. But they were few; he could despair of the situation, and this he did often when he was alone; he could accept it, as he came to do when with Ora; he could abandon himself to the gaiety of the moment, as in the mood in which Alice had found him. But he could not think out the course of events. He had now only one clear purpose, to make things as easy as he could to Ora, to obey her commands, to fall in with her idea, to say nothing which would disturb the artificial tranquillity which she seemed to have achieved. The letter had started on its way to Jack Fenning, the renunciation was set on foot. The few days, the week or two, that still remained to them seemed to make little difference. To scandal he had become indifferent, the arrival was to confute it; of pain he had become reckless since it was everywhere and in every course; the opinions of his friends he gathered merely as a source of bitter amusement; the good fortune on which he had allowed himself to descant to Alice Muddock had a very ironical flavour about it,

since it chose to come at the time when it could afford him no real gratification, when he was engrossed with another interest, when he had room only for one sorrow and only for one triumph.

At supper at one of his clubs that night he chanced to find Mr. Sidney Hazlewood, who was a member. Ashley sat down beside him at the table, exchanging a careless nod. Mr. Hazlewood ate his supper with steady silent persistence; Ashley made rather poor work of a kidney; he had not really wanted supper, but preferred it to going home to bed.

"You're not conversational," he observed at last to Hazlewood.

"Afraid of interrupting your reverie," Hazlewood explained with a grim smile.

"I shouldn't have sat down by you unless I'd wanted to talk. How's the piece going?"

"First-rate. Thought you'd have known; you're about pretty often."

"Yes, but I generally omit to enquire at the box office," said Ashley with an air of apology.

Mr. Hazlewood pushed back his chair and threw down his napkin. Then he lit a cigar with great care and took several whiffs. At last he spoke.

"Mind you, Mead," said he with a cautious air, "I don't say it's wrong of a man at your time of life to be a fool, and I don't say I haven't been just as great a fool myself, and I don't say that you haven't a better excuse for it than I ever had, and I don't say that half the men in town wouldn't be just as great fools as you if they had the chance."

"I'm glad you're not going to say any of those absurd things," remarked Ashley with gravity.

"But all I say is that you are a fool."

"Is that quite all?" asked Ashley.

Hazlewood's smile broadened a little.

"Not quite," said he. "I left out one word. An epithet."

Ashley surveyed him with a kindly and good-tempered smile.

"Well, old chap, I don't see how you could say anything else," he observed.

It was merely one, no doubt a typical one, of the opinions that had for the present to be disregarded. In due time the renunciation would confound them all. Of this Mr. Hazlewood and his like foresaw nothing; had it been shewn to them in a vision they would not have believed; if, *per impossibile*, they believed — Ashley's lips set tight and stern as imagination's ears listened to their cackling laughter. From of old virtue in man is by men praised with a sneer.

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CHAPTER XI

WHAT IS TRUTH?

THERE was one aspect of the renunciation on which Ora had the tact not to dwell in conversation with her faithful ally; it was, however, an added source of comfort to herself, and proved very useful at moments when her resolve needed reinforcement. As an incidental result of its main object, as a kind of by-product of beneficence, the renunciation was to make Alice Muddock happy. Ora had always given a corner to this idea. To use the metaphor which insisted on occurring to Ashley, Alice had a part — not a big part, but a pretty part; in the last act her faithful love was to be rewarded. She would not (and could not consistently with the plan of the whole piece) look to receive a passionate attachment, but a reasonable and sober affection, such as her modest wisdom must incline her to accept, would in the end be hers; from it was to spring, not rapturous joy, but a temperate happiness, and a permanent union with Ashley Mead. Ashley was to be led to regard this as the best solution, to fall in with it at first in a kind of resignation, and later on to come to see that it had been the best thing under the circumstances of the case. Ora could bring him to perceive this (though perhaps nobody else could); to her Alice would owe the temperate happiness, and Ashley a settlement in life from all points of view most advantageous. Ora herself continued to have a good deal to do with this hypothetical wedded life; she pic-

tured herself making appearances in it from time to time, assuaging difficulties, removing misunderstandings, perhaps renewing to Ashley her proof of its desirability, and shewing him once again that, sweet as her life with him and his with her must have proved, yet the renunciation had been and remained true wisdom, as well as the only right course. These postnuptial scenes with Ashley were very attractive to Ora in her moods of gentle melancholy. The picture of the married life in the considerable intervals during which she made no appearance in it, but was somewhere with Mr. Fenning, was left vague and undefined.

Ora caught at a visit from Lord Bowdon as the first fruit of the renunciation and a promise of all that was to follow after. He had not come near her since the day when she dismissed him with her "Don't;" within a week from the announcement of Mr. Fenning's approaching return he paid a call on her. The inference was easy, and to a large extent it was correct. Ora could not resist drawing her visitor and Irene Kilnorton into the play; quite small parts were theirs, but they furnished the stage and heightened the general impression. Their married life also was to be tinged and coloured by the past; they also were to owe something to the renunciation; it had restored to them complete tranquillity, removed from him a wayward impulse, from her a jealous pang, and set them both on the straight path of unclouded happiness. She could not say any of this to Bowdon, but she hinted it to Ashley, who laughed, and when Bowdon came she hinted to him her hopes concerning Alice Muddock. He laughed like Ashley, but with a very doubtful expression in his eyes. By now the world was talking rather loudly about Miss Pinsent and Mr. Ashley Mead. Bowdon

was inclined to think that his hostess was "humbugging" him in a somewhat transparent fashion. He did not resent it; he found, with an appreciable recrudescence of alarm, that he minded very little what she talked about so that she sat there and talked to him. His inward "Thank God, the fellow 's coming!" was a triumphant vindication of part, at least, of Ora's faith in the renunciation. He pulled his moustache thoughtfully as he observed,

"I suppose a match between Miss Muddock and Ashley was always an idea. Irene says old Sir James has been set on it for years."

Sir James made a quiet and unobtrusive entry on the stage, bringing (by a legitimate stretch of fancy) his sympathetic wife with him; even Ora could not make anything of Bob for scenic purposes.

"But Ashley 's not a fellow to be forced into what he doesn't care about."

"Not forced, no," murmured Ora. The method was not so crude as that.

"And we 've no right to take the lady's feelings for granted."

"Oh, no," said Ora earnestly.

"There are certainly no signs of anything of the sort at present."

"At present! No!" she cried almost indignantly. Then she detected a hint of amusement in Bowdon's eye and began to laugh. In spite of all the sorrow and pain involved in the renunciation, its spice of secrecy and mystification sometimes extorted a smile from her; people were so hopelessly puzzled about it, so very far from guessing the truth, and so wide of the mark in their conjectures. Bowdon evidently shared the general bewilderment and felt a difficulty in talking to her

about Ashley Mead. She presented him with another topic.

"The news about you and Irene made me so happy," she said. "Irene's such a dear."

"You're very kind," he muttered. This topic was not much less awkward than the other, and Ora's enthusiasm had imparted to her manner the intense cordiality and sympathy which made Irene say that she conveyed the idea of expecting to be kissed; he preferred that she should not suggest that idea to him.

"It's such a lovely arrangement in every way," she pursued. "Isn't it?" Her eyes were raised to his; she had meant to be quite serious, but her look betrayed the sense of fun with which she offered her congratulations. She could not behave quite as though nothing had ever passed between them; she was willing to minimise but declined to annihilate a certain memory common to them. "I'm going to come and see you very often when you're married," she went on. Bowdon was willing enough to meet her subtly hinted mockery.

"I hope you'll be very discreet," he said with a smile.

"Oh, I'll be discreet. There isn't much to be discreet about, is there?"

"That's not my fault," he allowed himself to remark as he rose to take leave.

"Oh, you're not going yet?" she cried. "If you do I shall think it was simply a duty call. And it's so long since I've seen you." Her innate desire — it was almost an instinct — to have every man leave her with as much difficulty as possible imparted a pathetic earnestness to her tone. "Perhaps I shan't have many more chances of seeing you."

"Many — after I'm married," he reminded her, smiling.

"No, I'm serious now," she declared. "You — you know what's going to happen, Lord Bowdon?"

"Yes, I know."

"Of course when Jack comes home I shan't be so free. Besides — !" She did not end the sentence; the suppressed words would obviously have raised the question of Jack Fenning's acceptability to her friends. For his part Bowdon immediately became certain that Jack was a ruffian. He held out his hand, ostensibly in farewell; Ora took it and pressed it hard, her eyes the while demanding much sympathy. Bowdon found himself giving her intense sympathy; he had not before realised what this thing meant to her, he had been too much occupied with what it meant to him. He could not openly condole with her on her husband's return, but he came very near that point in his good-bye.

"Your friends will always want to see you, and — and be eager to do anything in the world they can for you," he said. The pressure of her hand thanked him, and then he departed. As he walked out of the hall-door, he put his hat very firmly on his head and drew a long breath. He was conscious of having escaped a danger; and he could not deny, in spite of poor Ora's hard fortune, that the return of Mr. Fenning was a good thing.

Good or bad, the coming was near now. The brief and business-like letter had reached Bridgeport, Connecticut, and had elicited a reply by cable. In eight days Mr. Fenning might be expected at Southampton. As the event approached, it seemed to become less and less real to Ashley; he found himself wondering whether a man who is to be hanged on Monday has

more than the barest intellectual belief in the fact, whether it really sinks into his consciousness until the rope is absolutely round his neck. Accidents by sea and land suggested themselves to an irresponsible and non-indictable fancy; or Jack had merely meant to extort a gift of money; or his unstable purpose would change. The world that held himself and Ora seemed incapable of opening to receive Jack Fenning; something would happen. Nothing did happen except that the last days went on accomplishing themselves in their unmoved way, and when Ashley went to bed each night Jack Fenning was twenty-four hours nearer. Ora's conduct increased the sense of unreality. She wanted him always with her; she dissipated his scruples with radiant raillery or drowned them in threatened tears. On the other hand, she was full of Jack Fenning now; often talking about him, oftener still about how she would receive him. She sketched his career for Ashley's information; the son of a poor clergyman, he had obtained a berth in a shipowner's office at Hamburg; he had lost it and come home; he had made the acquaintance of a Jewish gentleman and been his clerk on the Stock Exchange; he had written a play and induced the Jewish gentleman to furnish money for its production; disaster followed; Jack became an auctioneer's clerk; the Jewish gentleman, with commendable forgivingness, had put him in the way of a successful gold mine (that is, a successfully floated gold mine); he had made two thousand pounds. "Then he married me," Ora interpolated into her summary narrative. The money was soon spent. Then came darker times, debts, queer expedients for avoiding, and queerer for contriving, payment, and at last a conviction that the air of America would suit him better for a time. The picture of a

worthless, weak, idle, plausible rascal emerged tolerably complete from these scattered touches. One thing she added, new to her hearer and in a way unwelcome: Jack was — had been, she put it, still treating him as belonging to the past — extremely handsome. "Handsomer than you, much," she said, laughing, with her face very near his over his shoulder as he sat moodily by the window. He did not look round at her, until, by accident as it seemed and just possibly was, a curl of her dark hair touched his cheek; then he forgave her the handsomeness of Jack Fenning.

Irene Kilnorton had been with her that day and had told her that, since she chose to have the man back, she must treat him properly and look as though she were glad to see him; that she must, in fact, give a fair trial to the experiment which she had decided to allow. Being thoroughly in harmony with the theory of renunciation, this advice made a great impression on Ora. She professed her joy that Jack was to arrive on a Sunday, because she would thus be free from the theatre and able to meet him at Southampton. To meet him at Southampton was an admirable way of treating him properly and of giving a fair trial to the experiment. Ashley's raised brows hinted that this excess of welcome was hardly due to the Prodigal. Ora insisted on it. He was past surprise by now, or he would have wondered when she went on:

"But of course I can't go alone; I hate travelling alone; and I don't know anything about how the boats come in or anything. You must come with me, you know."

"Oh, I'm to go with you, am I?"

"Yes; and you 'll go and find him and bring him to me. Somebody 'll tell you which is him."

"And then I'm to leave you with him and come back to town alone?"

Ora's smile suddenly vanished. "Don't, dear," she said, laying her hand on his arm. That was her way always when he touched on the black side of the situation. Her plans and pictures still stopped short with the arrival of the boat. "It'll be our last time quite alone and uninterrupted together," she reminded him, as though he could forget the object of the expedition and be happy in the thought that it meant two hours with her.

"I don't see why you shouldn't travel back with us," she added a moment later. "Oh, of course you will!"

He chafed at her use of the word "us," for now it meant herself and Jack, and had the true matrimonial ring, asserting for Mr. Fenning a position which the law only, and not Ashley's habit of thought, accorded him. But he would have to accustom himself to this "us" and all that it conveyed. He forced himself to smile as he observed, "Perhaps Fenning 'll want to smoke!"

Ora laughed merrily and said that she hoped he would. Even to Ashley it seemed odd that the notion appeared to her rather as a happy possibility than as a *reductio ad absurdum* of her attitude; she really thought it conceivable that Jack might go and smoke, while she and Ashley had another "last time quite alone together." But she had such an extraordinary power of commending absurdities to serious consideration that he caught himself rehearsing the best terms in which to make the suggestion to Mr. Fenning.

In those days he had it always in mind to tell her a thing on which he was resolutely determined, which even she could not make him falter about. With the entry of Jack Fenning must come his own exit. He

did not deceive himself as to his grounds for this resolve, or deck in any gorgeous colours of high principle what was at best no more than a dictate of self-respect and more probably in the main an instinct of pride. But from the hour of the arrival of the boat he meant to be no more an intimate friend of hers. Had his business engagements allowed he would have arranged to leave London. Absence from town was impossible to him without a loss which he could not encounter, but London is a large place, where people need not be met unless they are sought. He would deliver her over to her husband and go his way. But he did not tell her; she would either be very woeful, and that calamity he could not face, or she would give a thoughtless assent and go on making her pictures just the same. The resolution abode in his own heart as the one fixed point, as the one definite end to all this strange period of provisional indiscretion and unreal imaginings. When he thought of it, he rose to the wish that Jack might be still handsome and might prove more reputable and kinder than he had been in the old days. Ora herself was beginning to have hopes of Jack, or hopes of what she might make of him by her zealous care and dutiful fidelity; Ashley encouraged these hopes and they throve under his watering. In the course of the last week there was added to the great idea of a renunciation of Ashley the hardly less seductive and fascinating project of a reformation of Jack Fenning. This conception broadened and enriched the plot of the fanciful drama, added a fine scene or two, and supplied a new motive for the heroine. In the end Ora had great hopes of Jack in the future and a very much more charitable opinion of him in the past.

She paid her promised visit to Alice Muddock on the

Wednesday, Jack Fenning being due on the following Sunday. In these last days Ora devoted herself entirely to people who were, in some way or other, within the four corners of the scheme of renunciation. Alice was amazed to find in her a feeling about her husband's arrival hardly distinguishable from pleasure; at least she was sure that a cable message that he was not coming would have inflicted a serious disappointment on her visitor. But at the same time this strange creature was obviously, openly — a few weeks ago Alice would not have hesitated to say shamelessly — in love with Ashley Mead. The two men's names alternated on her lips; it seemed moral polyandry or little better. Alice's formulas were indeed at fault. And through it all ran the implied assertion that Alice was interested in the affair for a stronger reason than the friendship which she was so good as to offer to Ora. Here again, according to Ora's method, Irene Kilnorton's share in the scheme was hinted at, while Alice was left to infer her own. She did so readily enough, having drawn the inference on her own account beforehand, but her wonder at finding it in Ora's mind was not diminished. To be passionately in love with a man and to give him up was conceivable; any heights of self-sacrifice were within the purview of Alice's mind. To find a luxury in giving him up was beyond her. To return to a husband from a sense of duty would have been to Alice almost a matter of course, however bad the man might be; to set to work to make out that the man was not bad clashed directly with the honest perspicacity of her intellect. And, to crown all, in the interval, as a preparation for resuming the path of duty, to set all the town talking scandal and greet the scandal with a defiance terribly near to enjoyment! Alice, utterly at

fault, grew impatient; her hard-won toleration was hard tried.

"I'm sure you understand all I feel," said Ora, taking her friend's hand between hers.

"Indeed I don't," replied Alice bluntly.

"Anyhow you 're sorry for me?" Ora pleaded. Here Alice could give the desired assurance. Ora was content; sympathy was what she wanted; whether it came from brain or heart was of small moment.

By a coincidence, which at first sight looked perverse, Bob brought Babba Flint into Alice's room at tea-time. Alice did not like Babba, and feared that his coming would interrupt the revelation of herself which Ora in innocent unconsciousness was employed in giving. The result proved quite different. Babba had declared to Irene Kilnorton that the coming of Mr. Fenning was a figment concocted from caprice or perhaps with an indirect motive; he advanced the same view to Ora herself with unabashed impudence, yet with a seriousness which forbade the opinion that he merely jested.

"Of course I can't tell whether you expect him, Miss Pinsent. All I know is he won't come." Babba's eyeglass fell from his eye in its most conclusive manner.

"Oh, yes, he will," cried Ora triumphantly. "I know all about it; the boat, and the time, and everything else."

"You 'll see, he won't be there," Babba persisted. "I wonder if you 'll be awfully surprised!"

"Why should I say he 's coming if he isn't?" asked Ora, but rather with amusement than indignation.

"Oh, for an advertisement, or just because it came into your head, or as the homage liberty pays to matrimony; any reason you like, you know."

Their debate filled Alice with wonder. It was strange that Ora should lend an ear to Babba's suggestions, that

she should not at once silence him; yet she listened with apparent interest, although, of course, she repudiated the motives imputed to her and declared that in all sincerity she expected her husband. Babba fell back on blank assertion. "He won't come, you'll see," he repeated.

The extreme impertinence of the little man moved Alice to resentment; in whatever sense his remarks were taken, they must bear an offensive meaning. But Ora did not seem resentful; strangely enough she began to shew signs of disturbance, she brought forward serious arguments to prove that Jack Fenning would come, and appealed to Babba to alter his opinion with pathetic eyes. Babba was inexorable.

"Really you must allow Miss Pinsent to know," Alice expostulated.

"It's a matter of experience," Babba observed. "They're always going to turn up, but they never do."

"Why do you say he won't come?" asked Ora anxiously.

"I've told you the reason. They never do," repeated Babba obstinately. Bob Muddock burst into a laugh, Alice frowned severely, Ora's brows were knit in puzzled wrinkles. This suggestion of an impediment in the way of the renunciation and reformation was quite new to her; but she did not appear to be struck at all by what seemed to Alice the indecency of discussing it.

"Suppose he didn't!" Ora murmured audibly; a smile came slowly to her lips and her eyes seemed to grow full of half-imaged possibilities. Babba made no comment; his smile was enough for all who knew the facts of the present situation; for example, for all who knew in what company Miss Pinsent drove to the theatre. "If he didn't—" Ora began. Babba's mocking eye was on

her. She began to laugh. "I know what you 're thinking!" she cried with a menacing wave of her hand.

The scene had become distasteful, almost unendurable, to Alice Muddock. Here was the side of Ora that she detested; it raised all the old prejudices in her and argued that they were well justified. She also knew what Babba Flint's look meant, and wanted to turn him out of the room for it. Such punishment would be only proper; it would also have propitiated in some degree the jealousy which made her unwilling to admit that possibly Mr. Fenning might not come.

The young men went; she and Ora were alone together; Alice's feeling of hostility persisted and became manifest to Ora's quick perception. In an instant she implored pity and forgiveness by abandoning herself to condemnation.

"Now you see what I am! And you might have been my friend!" she murmured. "But you don't know how unhappy I am."

"I don't believe you 're unhappy at all," said Alice with blunt barbarity.

"Not unhappy!" exclaimed Ora in dismay. If she were not unhappy, the whole structure tumbled.

"You will be, though," Alice pursued relentlessly. "You 'll be very unhappy when Mr. Fenning comes, and I think you 'd be unhappy if by any chance he didn't come." She paused and looked at her visitor. "I shouldn't like to be like you," she said thoughtfully.

Ora sat quiet; there was a scared look on her face; she turned her eyes up to Alice who sat on a higher chair.

"Why do you say that sort of thing to me?" she asked in a low voice.

"It's quite true. I shouldn't. And all the rest is true too." Her voice grew harder and harder in opposition to an inner pleading for mercy. This woman should not wheedle her into lies; she would tell the truth for once, although Ora did sit there — looking like a child condemned to rigorous punishment.

"It's not decent the way you talk about it, and let people talk about it," she broke out in a burst of indignation. "Have you no self-respect? Don't you know how people talk about you? Oh, I wouldn't be famous at the price of that!"

Ora did not cry; the hurt was beyond tears; she grew white, her eyes were wide and her lips parted; she watched Alice as a dog seems to watch for the next fall of the whip.

"You say you're unhappy. Lots of us are unhappy, but we don't tell all the world about it. And we don't hug our unhappiness either and make a play out of it." What Ashley had reluctantly and secretly thought came in stern and cutting plainness from Alice's lips; but Ashley would have died sooner than breathe a word of it to Ora.

"I suppose," said Alice, "you think I'm angry because — because of something that concerns myself. I'm not, I'm just telling you the truth." She was sure that it was the truth, however it might be inspired, however it was that she had come to utter it. "What does that man say about you when you aren't there? He says almost everything to your face! And you laugh! What does he say after dinner, what does he say at his club?"

"Please let me go home," said Ora. "Please let me go home." She seemed almost to stagger as she rose. "I must go home," she said, "Or — or I shan't have time for dinner."

"I suppose you like —" Alice began, but she stopped herself. She had said enough; the face before her seemed older, thinner, drawn into lines that impaired its beauty, as it were scarred with a new knowledge; the eyes that met hers were terrified. "It's all true," she said to herself again. "Quite true. Only nobody has ever told her the truth."

She rang the bell, but did not go with Ora to the door; neither of them thought of shaking hands; a quarter of an hour before Ora would have offered one of her ready kisses. Now she went quietly and silently to the door and opened it with timid noiselessness. As she went out, she looked back over her shoulder; a movement from Alice, the holding out of a hand, would have brought her back in a flood of tears and a burst of pitiful protests at once against herself and against the accusations laid to her charge. No sign came; Alice stood stern and immovable.

"I'm late as it is. Good-bye," whispered Ora.

She went out. Alice stood still where she was for a moment before she flung herself into a chair, exclaiming again, and this time aloud,

"It's true, it's true; every word of it's the truth!" She was very anxious to convince herself that every word of it was true.

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CHAPTER XII

AT CLOSE QUARTERS

THE next few days were critical for the renunciation, and consequently for the reformation which was to accompany it. In the first place, Jack Fenning was now very near; secondly, Ashley Mead's behaviour was so perfect as to suggest almost irresistibly an alternative course; finally, thanks to Alice Muddock's outspokenness, Ora was inclined to call virtue thankless and to decide that one whom all the world held wicked might just as well for all the world be wicked. She had appealed from Alice to Irene Kilnorton, hinting at the cruelty to which she had been subjected. She found no comfort; there was an ominous tightening of Irene's lips. Ora flew home and threw herself — the metaphorical just avoids passing into the literal — on Ashley's bosom. There were tears and protests against universal injustice; she cried to him, "Take me away from all of them!" What answer did she expect or desire? He could not tell. Mr. Fenning was due on Sunday, and Ora's piece was running still. Yet at the moment it seemed as though she would fly into space with him and a hand-bag, leaving renunciations, reformations, virtues, careers, and livelihoods to look after themselves, surrendering herself to the rare sweetness of unhindered impulse. For himself, he was ready; he had come to that state of mind in regard to her.

His ordinary outlook on life was blocked by her image, his plan of existence, with all its lines of reason, of hope, of ambition, blurred by the touch of her finger. Only very far behind, somewhere remote in the background, lay the haunting conviction that these last, and not his present madness, would prove in the end the abiding reality. What made him refuse, or rather evade, the embracing of her request was that same helplessness in her which had restrained his kisses in the inn parlour. If she turned on him later, crying, "You could do what you liked with me, why did you do this with me?" what would he have to answer? "We 'll settle it to-morrow; you must start for the theatre now," he said. "So I must. Am I awfully late?" cried Ora.

That evening he dined with Bob Muddock. Bertie Jewett and Babba Flint were his fellow-guests. All three seemed to regard him with interest — Bob's, admiring; Bertie's, scornful; Babba's, amused. Bob envied the achievement of such a conquest; Bertie despised the man who wasted time on it; Babba was sympathetic and hinted confidential surprise that anybody made any bones about it. But they none of them doubted it; and of the renunciation none knew or took account. A course of action which fails to suggest itself to anybody incurs the suspicion of being mad, or at least wrong-headed and quixotic. Ashley told himself that his conduct was all these things, and had no countervailing grace of virtue. It was no virtue to fear a reproach in Ora's eyes; it was the merest cowardice; yet that fear was all that held him back.

After dinner Bob drew him to a sofa apart from their companions and began to discuss the dramatic profession. Ashley suffered patiently, but his endurance changed to amusement when Bob passed to the neigh-

bouring art of music, found in it a marked superiority, and observed that he had been talking over the subject with Minna Soames.

"I don't see how anybody can object to singing at concerts," said Bob, with a shake of the head for inconceivable narrow-mindedness, "not even the governor."

"Sits the wind in that quarter?" asked Ashley, laughing.

"I 've got my eye on her, if that 's what you mean," answered Bob. "She 's ripping, isn't she?"

The vague and violent charms which the epithet seemed to imply were not Minna's. Ashley replied that she was undoubtedly pretty and charming. Bob eyed him with a questioning air; it was as though a man who had been on a merry-go-round were consulted by one who thought of venturing on the trip.

"People talk a great deal of rot," Bob reflected. "A girl isn't degraded, or unsexed, or anything of that sort, just because she sings for her living."

"Surely not," smiled Ashley.

The prejudices were crying out in pain as Bob's newborn idea crushed and mangled them.

"But the governor 's so against all that sort of thing," Bob complained. Then he looked up at his friend. "That 's mostly your fault," he added, with an awkward laugh.

"My dear Bob, the cases are not parallel."

"Well, Miss Soames hasn't got a husband, of course."

There was no use in being angry, or even in representing that the remark which had seemed so obvious to Bob was a considerable liberty.

"Imagine her with a thousand husbands, and still the cases couldn't be parallel."

"She's not on the stage."

"And if she were, the distinctions run by people, not by professions," said Ashley.

"Well, I'm thinking of it," Bob announced. And he added, with a ludicrous air of desiring the suspicion, while he repudiated the fact, of dishonourable intentions, "All on the square, of course."

"Good heavens, I should think so!" said Ashley The imagination of man could attribute no crooked dealings or irregular positions to Miss Soames.

"Still, I don't know about the governor," Bob ended, with a relapse into gloom.

"She'd retire from her work, of course?" Ashley suggested, smiling.

"If she married me? Oh, of course," said Bob decisively. "She wouldn't want the money, would she?" Any other end of a profession had not occurred to him, and his opinion that active and public avocations were not "unsexing" to women was limited by the proviso that such employments must be necessary for bread-and-butter.

An eye for the variety of the human mind may make almost any society endurable. Here was Bob struggling with conscious daring against convention, as a prelude to paying his court to a lady who worshipped the god whom he persuaded himself to brave; here was Babba Flint drifting vulgarly, cheerfully, irresponsibly, through all his life and what money he happened from time to time to possess; here was Bertie Jewett, his feet set resolutely on the upward track, scorning diversion, crying "Excelsior" with exalted fervour as he pictured the gold he would gather and pocket on the summit of the hill; here, finally, was Ashley himself, who had once set out to climb another hill, and now eagerly turned

his head to listen to a sweet voice that cried to him from the valley. Such differences may lie behind four precisely similar and equally spotless white shirt-fronts on the next sofa any evening that we drop into the club. Therefore it needs discrimination, and perhaps also some prepossessions, to assign degrees of merit to the different ideas of how time in this world had best be passed.

"The fact is," Babba was saying to Bertie Jewett, as he nodded a knowing head towards Ashley, "he was getting restive, so she made up this yarn about her husband." He yawned, as if the matter were plain to dulness.

"What an ass he is!" mused Bertie. "Don't you know the chance he had? He might have been where I am!"

Babba turned a rather supercilious look on his companion.

"The shop? Must be a damned grind, isn't it?"

Bertie was nettled; he revealed a little of what he had begun to learn that he ought to conceal.

"I bet you I earn a sovereign quicker than you earn a shilling," he remarked.

"Daresay you do," murmured Babba, regarding the end of his cigar. Babba was vulgar, but not with this sort of vulgarity.

"And more of 'em," pursued Bertie.

"But you have an infernally slow life of it," Babba assured him. Babba was ignorant of the engrossing charms that sparkle in the eyes of wealth, forbidding weariness in its courtship, making all else dull and void of allurement to its votaries. To each man his own hunger.

Back to his hunger went Ashley Mead, no less ravenous, yet seeing his craving in the new light of desires

revealed to him, but still alien from him. All his world seemed now united in crying out to him to mind his steps, in pointing imploringly or mockingly to the abyss before his feet, in weeping, wondering, or laughing at him. That some of the protests were conscious, some unwitting, made no difference; the feeling of standing aloof from all the rest gave him a sense of doom, as though he were set apart for his work, and amidst condemnation, pity, and ridicule must go through with it. For to-morrow he thought that she would come with him, leaving Mr. Fenning desolate, Sidney Hazlewood groaning over agreements misunderstood as to their nature, friends heart-broken, and the world agape.

But the next day she would not come, or, rather, prayed not to be taken.

"You mustn't, you mustn't," she sobbed. "Alice Muddock had made me angry, oh, and hurt me so. I was ready to do anything. But don't, Ashley dear, don't! Do let me be good. That 'll be the best way of answering her, won't it? I couldn't answer her then."

"Alice? What 's Alice been saying?" he asked, for he had not been told the details of that particular case of cruelty.

"I can't tell you. Oh, it was horrible! Was it true? Say it wasn't true!"

"You haven't told me what it was," he objected.

"Oh dear me, neither I have!" cried Ora, drawing back from him; her eyes swam in tears, but her lips bent in smiles. "How awfully absurd of me!" she exclaimed, and broke into the low luxurious laughter that he loved. "Well, it was something bad of me; so it couldn't be true, could it?"

He pressed her to tell him what it was and she told him, becoming again sorrowful and wounded as she

rehearsed the story; the point of view surprised her so. To Ashley it was no surprise, nothing more than a sharp unsparing utterance of the doubts of his own mind. His quarrel with Alice was that she said it, not that she thought it; she was bound to think it when he in all his infatuation could not stifle the thought. Was he in love then with a bundle of emotions and ready to give away his life in exchange for a handful of poses? In self-defence he embraced the conclusion and twisted it to serve his purpose. What more is anybody, he asked — what more than the sheet on which slide after slide is momentarily shewn?

"But still she was wrong," said Ora. "Oh, I can forgive her. Of course I forgive her. It 's only because she 's fond of you. I know I 'm not really like that. It 's not the true me, Ashley."

The idea of the "true me" delighted Ora, and the "true me" required that Mr. Fenning should be met punctually on Sunday next. The renunciation raised its head again.

"The 'true me,' then, is really a very sober and correct person?" asked Ashley.

"Yes," she answered, enjoying the paradox she asserted. Her interest in herself was frank and almost might be called artistic. "Do you think me strange?" she asked. "I believe you 're laughing at me half the time."

"And the other half?"

"We weep together, don't we? Poor Ashley!"

On the Saturday he came to see her again in order to make final arrangements for their expedition of the next day. There was also a point on which they had never touched, to which, as he believed, Ora had given no consideration. Was Mr. Fenning to settle down in the

little house at Chelsea? At present the establishment was in all its appearance and fittings so exclusively feminine that it seemed an impossible residence for a man. Ora was not in the room when Janet ushered him in; that respectable servant lingered near the door and, after a moment's apparent hesitation, spoke to him.

"I beg pardon, sir," she said, "but could you tell me where I can get some good whiskey?"

"Whiskey?" Ashley exclaimed in surprise.

"Mr. Fenning, sir, used to be particular about his whiskey, and as he 's —"

"Oh, yes, of course, Janet." He thought for a moment and mentioned the wine merchant with whom Lord Bowdon dealt. "I think you 'll be safe there," he ended with a nod.

Janet thanked him and went out.

"This really brings it home," said Ashley, dropping into a chair and laughing weakly to himself. "To-morrow night Jack Fenning 'll sit here and drink that whiskey, while I —"

He rose abruptly and walked about the room. His portrait in the silver frame was still on the little table by Ora's favourite seat; not even a letter from Bridgeport, Connecticut, was there to hint of Mr. Fenning. The demand for a good whiskey seemed the sole forerunner of the wanderer's return.

"She doesn't know in the least what she 's doing," Ashley muttered as he flung himself into his seat again.

That afternoon she was in the mood hardest for him to bear. She was sanguine about her husband; she recalled the short time they had contrived to be happy together, dwelt on the amiable points in his character, ascribed his weaknesses more to circumstances than to

nature, and took on her own shoulders a generous share of blame for the household's shipwreck. All this is to say that the reformation for the instant took precedence of the renunciation, and a belief in the possibility, not perhaps of being happy with Jack, but at least of making Jack happy, was bedecked in the robes of a virtuous aspiration. "It would be no use having him back if I couldn't make him happy, would it?" she asked. She shewed sometimes this strange forgetfulness of her friend's feelings.

"I know I've got a photograph of him somewhere," she said with a troubled little frown. "I wonder where it is!" Then a lucky thought brought a smile. "I expect he'd like to see it on the mantel-piece, wouldn't he?" she cried, turning to Ashley.

"I should think he'd be very touched. He might even believe it had been there all the time."

"Don't be sarcastic," said Ora good-humouredly. "I'll ask Janet where I've put it."

Janet, being summoned and questioned, knew where Miss Pinsent had put the photograph, or anyhow where it was to be found. In a few minutes she produced it.

"It is handsome, you see," said Ora, handing it across to Ashley. She appeared anxious for a favourable opinion from him.

The face was certainly handsome. The features were straight, the eyes large, the brow well formed; there was no great appearance of intellect or resolution, but the smile was amiable. Ashley handed it back with a nod of assent, and Ora set it on the mantel-piece. Ashley's bitterness overflowed.

"Put it in the frame instead of mine," he said, stretching out his hand to take his own portrait.

In an instant Ora was across to the table and snatched

up the picture. She held it close to her with both hands and stood fronting him defiantly.

"No," she said, "no. You shan't touch it. Nobody shall touch it."

He leant back with a smile of despairing amusement. She put down the portrait and came close to him, looking at him intently; then she dropped on her knees beside him and took his hand between hers.

"Fancy you daring to think that!" she said. A look of terror came into her eyes. "You 're not going to be like that?" she moaned. "I can't go on if you 're going to be like that."

He meant far more than he had hinted in his bitter speech; this afternoon he had intended to tell her his resolution; this was his last visit to the little house; from to-morrow afternoon he would be an acquaintance to whom she bowed in the streets, whom she met now and then by chance. He might tell her that now — now while she held his hands between hers. And if he told her that and convinced her of it, she would not go to meet Jack Fenning. He sat silent as she looked up in his eyes. His struggle was short; it lacked the dramatic presentment of Ora's mental conflicts, it had no heroic poses; but there emerged again clearly from the fight the old feeling that to use her love and his power in this fashion would not be playing fair; he must let her have her chance with her husband.

"I was a brute, Ora," he said. "I'll do just what you like, dear."

With a bound she was back to merriment and her sanguine view of favourable possibilities in Mr. Fenning. She built more and more on these last, growing excited as she pictured how recent years might, nay must, have improved him, how the faults of youth might, indeed

would, have fallen away, and how the true man should be revealed. "And if he wants a friend, you 'll always be one to him," she ended. Ashley, surrendering at discretion, promised to be a friend to Jack Fenning.

The next day found her in the same temper. She was eager and high-strung, merry and full of laughs, thoughtfully kind, and again thoughtlessly most cruel. When he called for her in the morning she was ready, waiting for him; from her air they might have been starting again for a day in the country by themselves, going to sit again in the meadow by the river, going to dine again in the inn parlour whose window opened on the sweet old garden. No such reminiscences, so sharp in pain for him, seemed to rise in her or to mar her triumph. For triumphant she was; her great purpose was being carried out; renunciation accomplished, reformation on the point of beginning. Prosperously the play had run up to its last great scene; soon must the wondering applause of friends fall on her ear; soon would Alice Muddock own that her virtue had been too cruel, and Babba Flint confess his worldly sagacity at fault. To herself now she was a heroine, and she rejoiced in her achievements with the innocent vanity of a child who displays her accomplishments to friendly eyes. How much she had suffered, how much forgone, how much resisted! Now she was to reap her reward.

Their train was late; if the boat had made a good passage it would be in before them; the passengers who had friends to meet them would be in waiting. They might find Jack Fenning on the platform as their engine steamed into the station. They had talked over this half way through the journey, and Ora seemed rather pleased at the prospect; Ashley took advantage of her happy mood to point out that it would be better for him

to leave her alone with Jack; he would get a plate of cold meat somewhere, and go back to town by himself later on. She acquiesced reluctantly but without much resistance. "We can tell you about our journey afterwards," she said. Then had come more rosy pictures of the future. At last they were finished. There was a few minutes' silence. Ashley looked out of the window and then at his watch.

"We ought to be there in ten minutes," he said.

Her eyes grew wide; her hands dropped in her lap; she looked at him.

"In ten minutes, Ashley?" she said in a low voice. It had come at last, the thing, not pictures, not imaginings of the thing. "Ten minutes?" she whispered.

He could hardly speak to her. As her unnatural excitement, so his unnatural calm fell away; he lost composure and was not master of his voice. He took her hands and said, "Good-bye, my dear, good-bye. I'm going to lose you now, Ora."

"Ashley, Ashley!" she cried.

"I'm not going to be unkind, but there must be a difference."

"Yes," she said in a wondering tone. "There must, I suppose. But you'll come often?"

He meant never to come.

"Now and then, dear," he said. Then he kissed her; that he had not meant to do; and she kissed him.

"Ashley," she whispered, "perhaps he won't be kind to me; perhaps — oh, I never thought of that! Perhaps he'll be cruel, or — or not what I've fancied him. Ashley, my love, my love, don't leave me altogether! I can't bear it, indeed I can't. I shall die if you leave me."

She was terrified now at the thought of the unknown

man waiting for her and the loss of the man whom she knew so well. Her dramatic scenes helped her no more; her tears and terror now were unrehearsed; she clung to his hand as though it held life for her.

"Oh, how did I ever think I could do it?" she moaned. "Are we going slower? Is the train stopping? Oh, are we there, are we there?"

"We've not begun to go slower yet," he said. In five minutes they must arrive.

"Stay with me till I see him; you must stay; you must stay till I've seen what — what he's going to be to me. I shall kill myself if you leave me."

"I'll stay till you've found him," Ashley answered in a hard restrained voice. "Then I must go away."

The train rumbled on; they were among the houses now; the ships in the harbour could be seen; the people in the next carriage were moving about, chattering loudly and merrily. The woman he loved sat with despairing eyes, clinging to his hand. "It's slower," she whispered, with lips just parted. "It's slower now, isn't it?" The train went slower; he nodded assent. The girl next door laughed gaily; perhaps she went to meet her lover. Suddenly the brake creaked, they stopped, there was something in the way. "How tiresome!" came loudly and impatiently from next door. Ora's grasp fixed itself tighter on his hand; she welcomed the brief reprieve. Her eyes drew him to her; the last embrace seemed to leave her half animate; she sank back in her seat with closed eyes. With a groan and a grumble the wheels began to move again. Ora gave a little shiver but made no other sign. Ashley let down the window with a jerk, and turned his face to the cool air that rushed in. He could not look more at Ora; he had a thing to do now, the last thing, and it

was not good for the doing of it that he should look at her. She might cry again to him, "Take me away!" and now he might forget that to obey was not fair play. Besides, here came the platform, and on the platform he would find Jack Fenning. There may be passions but there must not be scenes; he could not tell Jack that he had decided to take Ora back to town on his own account. He and she between them had spun a web of the irrevocable; they had followed virtue, here was the reward. But where were the trappings which had so gorgeously ornamented it? Ora's eyes were closed and she saw them no more.

Slowly they crept into the station; the platform was full of people and of luggage; it seemed as though the boat were already in. At last the train came to a stand; he laid his hand lightly on Ora's.

"Here we are," he said. "Will you wait by the carriage till I find out where he is?"

She opened her eyes and slowly rose to her feet.

"Yes; I'll do what you tell me," she said.

He opened the door and helped her to get out. She shivered and drew her cloak closer round her. There was a bench near. He led her to it and told her to sit there. "I shall know him and I'll bring him to you. Promise not to move," he said.

Just as he turned to leave her she put out her hand and laid it on his arm.

"Ashley!" he heard her whisper. He bent down to catch what she said, but it was a moment before she went on. It seemed as though words came hard to her and she would like to tell him all with her eyes. She raised her other hand and pointed to the arm that rested on his.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

"Did I ever tell you? I forget what I've told you and what I haven't."

"What is it? What do you want to tell me?"

"He struck me once; on the arm, just there, with his fist." She touched her arm above the elbow, near the shoulder.

She had never told him that; nothing less than this moment's agony, wherein sympathy must be had at every cost, could have brought it to her lips. Ashley pressed her hand and turned away to look for Jack Fenning.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE HEROINE FAILS

THE fast train, by which they ought to travel, left for London in a quarter of an hour; a slow train would follow twenty minutes later. Ashley procured this information before undertaking his search; since the platform was still crowded it seemed possible that Mr. Fenning would not be found in time for the fast train. He proved hard to find; yet he might have been expected to be on the look-out. Ashley sought him conscientiously and diligently, but before long a vague hope began to rise in him that the man had not come after all. What then? He did not answer the question. It was enough to picture Ora freed from her fears, restored to the thoughtless joyousness of their early days together. If by wild chance he had found the man dead or heard that he was dead, he would have been glad with a natural heathen exultation. People die on voyages across the Atlantic sometimes; there is an average of deaths in mid-ocean; averages must be maintained; how maintain one with more beneficial incidental results than by killing Mr. Fenning? Ashley smiled grimly; his temper did not allow the humour of any situation to escape him; he felt it even in the midst of the strongest feelings. His search for Jack Fenning, while Jack Fenning's wife sat in terror, while he loved Jack Fenning's wife, had its comic side; he wondered

how matters would strike Jack, supposing him to be alive, and to have come; or, again, if he were dead and fluttering invisible but open-eyed over the platform.

He saw the girl who had been in the next carriage, hanging on a young man's arm, radiant and half in tears; but the young man was not like Jack's photograph. There were many young men, but none of them Jack Fenning. He scoured the platform in vain. A whistle sounded loud, and there were cries of "Take your seats!" Ashley looked at his watch; that was the express starting; they would be doomed to crawl to town. Where the plague was Jack Fenning? This suspense would be terrible for Ora. How soon could he be safe in going back and telling her that Jack had not come? What a light would leap to her face! How she would murmur, "Ashley!" in her low rich voice! She seemed able to say anything and everything in the world to him with that one word, "Ashley!" to help the eloquence of her eyes.

A rush of people scurrying out of the refreshment-room and running to catch the express encountered and buffeted him. Here was a place he had not ransacked; perhaps Jack Fenning was in the refreshment-room; a remembrance of Janet's anxiety about a good whiskey gave colour to the idea. Ashley waited till the exodus was done and then strolled in; the place was almost empty; the barmaids were reaching their arms over the counter to gather up the used glasses or wipe the marble surface with cloths. But at the far end of the room there was a man standing at the bar, with a tumbler before him; he was smoking and in conversation with the girl who served him. Ashley stood still on the threshold for a moment or two, watching this man. "This is my man," he said to himself; he seemed

to have an intuitive knowledge of the fact and not to rely on any pose or air which he had noticed in the photograph; he knew that he was looking at Ora's husband, and stood and looked at him. The man had come; he was not dead; he was here, drinking at the bar. "How much would he take to go away again?" That was Ashley's thought. Then he shook his head and walked towards the man, who had just set his glass down empty.

"You 'll have missed the express," said the girl behind the counter.

"I was bound to have a drink," protested the customer in a rather injured tone.

He turned away, stooped, lifted a hand-bag, and came down the room. Ashley noticed that his right hand was bandaged; he thought he noticed also a slight uncertainty in his walk; he did not lurch or stagger, but he swayed a little. "Just sixpenn'orth too much," was Ashley's summary. Then he walked up to the stranger and asked if he had the honour of addressing Mr. Fenning.

There remained always in Ashley Mead's mind a memory of Jack Fenning as he was that day, of his soft blurred voice, his abashed eyes, his slight swayings, and the exaggerated apologetic firmness (or even aggression) of gait that followed them, of his uneasy deference towards the man who met him, of his obvious and unfeigned nervousness on being told that Miss Pinsent was waiting for him. Had child married child? The question leapt to Ashley's thoughts. Here was no burly ruffian, full of drink and violence. He had been drinking, but surely as a boy who takes his second glass of birthday port, not knowing the snake which lurks among that pleasant, green grass? He had struck Ora;

the ugly fact was there; yet now Ashley found himself asking whether children had not their tempers, whether they are to be judged as men are judged, as gentlemen claim to be judged. Jack Fenning came neither in a truculent resentment against his wife, nor in a masterful assertion of his rights, nor (which would have been worst of all) in a passion for her. He did not question Ashley's position, he did not ask how he came to be there; nor did he demand to be taken to his wife, nor did he fly to seek her.

"She's here, is she?" he said with an unmistakable accent of alarm.

"Yes, she's here. Come along. I'll take you to her," said Ashley curtly. He was angry to find his resentment oozing away. "Didn't you know she was coming to meet you?"

"She said she might," murmured Jack. "But I didn't think she would."

"I thought there'd be a crowd and so on, so I ran down with her," Ashley explained, despising himself for explaining at all.

"Awfully kind of you," said Mr. Fenning. "Where — where did you leave her?"

"Oh, on a seat on the platform. Where's your luggage?"

"Here." He held up the hand-bag.

"That all?"

"Yes, that's all," said Jack with a propitiatory smile. "I didn't see the good of bringing much." He paused and then added, "I haven't got much, you know." Another pause followed. "I hope that — that Miss Pinsent's all right?" he ended.

"Yes, she's all right. Come along." Then he asked abruptly, "Hurt your hand?"

Jack raised his hand and looked at it. "I got it burnt," he said. "We were making a night of it, and some fool made the poker hot — we had an open fire — and I didn't see it was hot and laid hold of it." He looked at his companion's face, which wore a grim smile. "Of course I shouldn't have done it if I hadn't had a drop too much," he added, smiling.

"Good God!" groaned Ashley to himself as he led the way. Wouldn't anything, the burly ruffian, the crafty schemer, or even the coarse lover, have been better than this? Any of them might have ranked as a man, any of them might have laid a grasp on Ora and ruled her life to some pattern. But what could or should this poor creature do? Why, he had come at her bidding, and now was afraid to meet her!

"Has she talked about me?" Jack asked timidly.

"Yes, a lot," said Ashley. He looked over his shoulder and sent a very direct glance into his companion's eyes. "She 's told me all about it, or nearly all," he added. Jack looked ashamed and acutely distressed. Ashley felt sorry for him and cursed himself for the feeling. "You 'll get along better now, I hope," he said, looking away. Then he smiled; it had occurred to him to wonder what all the folk who were so interested in the coming of Mr. Fenning would make of this Mr. Fenning who had come. For an embodiment of respectability, of regularity of life, and of the stability of the conjugal relation, this creature was so — there seemed but one word — so flabby.

"Is Janet still with Miss Pinsent?" asked Jack. It was evident that he hesitated as to what he ought to call his wife. There was a little pause before he pronounced her name.

"Yes," said Ashley. "Janet 's there. She 's ordered

some whiskey you 'll like." Jack, unobservant of sarcasm, smiled gratefully; he reminded Ashley of a child rather afraid of its parents and finding comfort in the presence of a kind familiar nurse. "It was about here I left Miss Pinsent," Ashley went on, glancing round.

There was the seat on which Ora had sat; but Ora was not on the seat. Ashley looked about, scanning the platform, seeking the graceful figure and gait that he knew so well. Jack put his bag down on the seat and stared at the roof of the station.

"I don't see her," said Ashley. "She must have moved." He glanced at Jack and added with a sudden burst of laughter, "Now you must stay here while I look for her!"

"You 're very kind," said Jack Fenning, sinking down on the seat.

"I might be the father of twins," said Ashley, as he walked off. Jack, left alone, furtively unclasped the bag, sought a small bottle, and took a small mouthful from it; he wanted all his nerve to meet his wife.

Again Ashley Mead searched the station and ransacked the waiting-rooms; again in whimsical despair he explored the refreshment saloon; all were empty. What had become of Ora? He returned to the seat where Jack Fenning was. A tall burly guard stood by Jack, regarding him with a rather contemptuous smile. When Ashley approached he turned round.

"Perhaps you 're the gentleman, sir?" he said. "Mr. Mead, sir?"

"I 'm Mr. Mead," said Ashley.

"The lady who went by the express left this note for you, sir. I thought it was for this gentleman but he says it isn't."

"Thanks, I expect it's for me," said Ashley, ex-

changing a shilling for a scrap of twisted paper addressed to him in Ora's familiar scrawl. The guard looked at the pair with a faint curiosity, spun his shilling in the air, and turned away. They were, after all, a very unimportant episode in the life of the guard.

"I have gone. As you love me, don't let him follow me. I am heart-broken: — Ora."

Thus ran the note which Ashley read. At the last moment, then, the great drama had broken down, renunciation and reformation had refused to run in couples, the fine scenes would not be played and — the heroine had fled from the theatre! An agreement was an agreement, as Mr. Hazlewood insisted; but Ora had broken hers. Here was Ashley Mead with a stray husband on his hands! He laughed again as he re-read the note. Where had she gone, poor dear, she and her broken heart? She was crying somewhere with the picturesqueness that she could impart even to the violent forms of grief. His laugh made friends with a groan as he looked down on the flabby figure of Jack Fenning. That such a creature should make such a coil! The world is oddly ordered.

"What the devil are we to do now?" he exclaimed aloud, glancing from the note to Jack, and back from Jack to the note. The note gave no help; Jack's bewildered questioning eyes were equally useless. "She 's gone," Ashley explained with a short laugh.

"Gone? Where to?" Helplessness still, not indignation, not even surprise, marked the tone.

"I don't know. You 're not to follow her, she says."

Jack seemed to sink into a smaller size as he muttered forlornly,

"She told me to come, you know." His uninjured

hand moved longingly but indecisively towards his bag. "Will you have a dram?" he asked.

"No, I won't," said Ashley. "Well, we can't stay here all night. What are you going to do?"

"I don't understand what you mean by saying she's gone," moaned Jack.

"It's all she says — and that you're not to follow. What are you going to do?"

His look now was severe and almost cruel; Jack seemed to cringe under it.

"I don't know," he muttered. "You see I — I've got no money."

"No money?"

"No. I had a little, but I had infernally bad luck at poker, coming over. You wouldn't believe how the luck ran against me."

Ashley put his hands in his pockets and regarded his companion.

"So you've no money?"

"About five shillings."

"And now you've no wife!"

Jack twisted in his seat. "I wish I hadn't come," he said fretfully.

"So do I," said Ashley. "But here you are!" He took a turn along the platform. The burly guard saw him and touched his hat.

"Train for London in five minutes, sir. The last to-night, sir. Going on?"

"Damn it, yes, we'll go on," said Ashley Mead. At least there was nothing to be gained by staying there. "Your ticket takes you through to London, I suppose?" he asked Jack.

"Yes, it does; but what am I to do there?" asked Jack forlornly.

Something restrained Ashley from the obvious retort, "What the devil do I care?" If he abandoned Jack, Jack must seek out Ora; he must track her by public and miscellaneous inquiries; he must storm the small house at Chelsea, braving Ora for the sake of Janet and the whiskey. Or if he did not do that, he would spend his five shillings as he had best not, and — visions of police-court proceedings and consequential newspaper broad-sheets rose before Ashley's eyes.

He took Jack to London with him. The return journey alone with Mr. Fenning was an unconsidered case, an unrehearsed effect. Mr. and Mrs. Fenning were to have gone together; in one mad pleasant dream he and Ora were to have gone together, with Jack smoking elsewhere. Reality may fail in everything except surprises. Ora was heaven knew where, heart-broken in Chelsea or elsewhere, and Ashley was in charge of Mr. Fenning.

"Good God, how everybody would laugh!" thought Ashley, himself hovering between mirth and ruefulness. The pencil of Babba Flint would draw a fine caricature of this journey; the circumstances might wring wonder even from Mr. Hazlewood's intimate and fatigued acquaintance with the ways of genius; as for Kensington Palace Gardens — Ashley suddenly laughed aloud.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack.

"It's all so damned absurd," said Ashley, laughing still. An absurd tragedy — and after all that Jack should come as he did, be what he was, and go on existing, was in essentials pure tragedy — seemed set on foot. "What am I to do with the fellow?" asked Ashley of himself. "I can't let him go to Chelsea." Nor, on reflection, could he let him go either to the workhouse or to the police-court. In fact, by an im-

pulsive extension of the very habit which had appealed so strongly to his chivalry, Ora had thrown not herself only but her husband also on his hands!

London drew near, even for the slow train, and with London came the problem. Ashley solved it in a flash, with a resolve that preserved the mixture of despair and humour which had become his attitude towards the situation of affairs. Above him in his house by Charing Cross there lived a clerk; the clerk had gone for a month's holiday, and had given liberty to the housekeeper to let his bed-sitting-room (so the compound was termed) to any solvent applicant. Jack Fenning should occupy the room for this night at least; he would be safe from danger, from observation, from causing trouble at Chelsea or wherever his wife might be. Thus to provide for him seemed mere humanity; he had but five shillings and a weakness for strong drink; and although he had struck Ora (the violence grew more and more inconceivable), yet in a sense he belonged to her. "And something must happen to clear it all up soon," Ashley reflected in an obstinate conviction that things in the end went reasonably.

A short interview with the housekeeper was enough to arrange for Jack Fenning's immediate comfort; then Ashley took him into his own room and gave him an improvised supper, and some whiskey and water mixed very weak; Jack regarded it disconsolately but made no protest; he lugged out a pipe and began to smoke, staring the while into the empty grate. "I wonder where she 's gone!" he said once, but Ashley was putting on his slippers and took no notice of the question. There lay on the table a note and a telegram; Jack's eyes wandered to them. "Perhaps the wire's from her," he suggested timidly.

"Perhaps," said Ashley, taking it up. But the message was from Alice Muddock and ran, "Father had a paralytic stroke to-day. Afraid serious. Will you come to-morrow?"

"It's not from Miss Pinsent," said Ashley, as he turned to the note. This was from Bowdon, sent by hand: "I'm glad to say that I've persuaded Irene to be married in a month from now. As you're such a friend of hers as well as of mine, I hope you'll be my best man on the occasion."

"And the note's not from her either," said Ashley, walking up to the mantel-piece and filling his pipe.

Jack leant back in his chair and gulped down his weak mixture; he looked up in Ashley's face and smiled feebly. Ashley's brows were knit, but his lips curved in a smile. The mixed colours held the field; here was poor old Sir James come to the end of his work, to the end of new blocks and the making of sovereigns; here was Bowdon triumphantly setting the last brick on the high wall behind which he had entrenched himself against the assault of wayward inclinations. Was Irene then at peace? Would Bob hold his own or would Bertie Jewett grasp the reins? Was Bowdon resigned or only fearful? What a break-up in Kensington Palace Gardens! What the deuce should he do with this man? And where in heaven's name was Ora Pinsent? Ashley's eyes fell on a couple of briefs which had been sent after him from the Temple; it seemed as though the ordinary work of life were in danger of neglect.

"We can't do anything to-night, you know," he said to Jack in an irritated tone. "You don't want to knock her up to-night, I suppose, even if she's at her house?"

"No," said Jack meekly.

"Are you ready for bed then?"

Jack cast one longing glance at the whiskey bottle, and said that he was. Ashley led him upstairs, turned on the gas, and shewed him the room he was to occupy. Desiring to appear friendly, he lingered a few moments in desultory and forced conversation, and, seeing that Jack's wounded hand crippled him a little, began to help him to take his things out of the bag and lay them in handy places. Jack accepted his services with regard to the bag, and set about emptying his own pockets on the mantel-piece. Presently Ashley, his task done, turned round to see his companion standing with back turned, under the gas jet; he seemed to be regarding something which he held in his hand.

"I think you'll be all right now," said Ashley, preparing to make his escape.

Jack faced round with a slight start and an embarrassed air. He still held in his hand the object which he had been regarding; Ashley now perceived it to be a photograph. Was it Ora's — Ora's, treasured through years of separation, of quarrel, of desertion and apparent neglect? Had the man then grace in him so to love Ora Pinsent? A flash of kindliness lit up Ashley's feelings towards him; a pang of sympathy went near to making him sorry that Ora had fled from welcoming the home-comer. His eyes rested on Jack with a friendly look; Jack responded with a doubtful wavering smile; he seemed to ask whether he could in truth rely on the new benevolence which he saw in his host's eyes. Ashley smiled, half at his own queer thoughts, half to encourage the poor man. The smile nourished Jack's growing confidence; with a roguish air which

had not been visible before he held out the picture to Ashley, saying,

"Pretty girl, isn't she?"

With a stare Ashley took the portrait. It could not be Ora's, if he spoke of it like that; so it seemed to the lover who translated another's feelings into his own. In an instant he retracted; that was how Jack Fenning would speak of Ora; short-lived kindliness died away; the man was frankly intolerable. But the sight of the picture sent his mind off in another direction. The picture was not Ora's, unless in previous days Ora had been of large figure, of bold feature, of self-assertive aspect, given to hats outrageous, and to signing herself, "Yours ever, Daisy." For such were the salient characteristics of the picture which Mr. Jack Fenning had brought home with him. A perverse freak of malicious memory carried Ashley back to the room in the little house at Chelsea, where his own portrait stood in its silver frame on the small table by Ora's favourite seat. *Mutato nomine, de te!* But, lord, what a difference the name makes!

"Very pretty," he remarked, handing back the image which had occasioned his thought. "Some one you know on the other side?"

"Yes," said Jack, standing the picture up against the wall.

Ashley was absurdly desirous of questioning him, of learning more about Daisy, of discovering whether Mr. Fenning had his romance or merely meditated in tranquillity on a pleasant friendship. But he held himself back; he would not be more mixed up with the man than fate and Ora Pinsent had commanded. There was something squalid about the man, so that he seemed to infect what he touched with his own flabby meanness.

How in the world had Ora come to make him her husband? No doubt five years of whiskey, in society of which Daisy was probably too favourable a specimen to be typical, would account for much. He need not have been repulsive always; he might even have had a fawning attractiveness; it hung oddly about him still. But how could he ever have commanded love? Love asks more, some material out of which to fashion an ideal, some nobility actual or potential. At this point his reflections were very much in harmony with the views of Alice Muddock. He hated to think what Ora had been to this man; now he thanked God that she had run away. He would have liked himself to run away somewhere, never to see Jack Fenning, to forget that he had ever seen him, to rid Ora of every association with him. It was odious that the thought of her must bring the thought of Fenning; how soon would he be able to think of her again without this man shouldering his way into recollection by her side? Until he could achieve that, she herself, suffering an indignity, almost seemed to suffer a taint.

"Good-night," said he. "We 'll have a talk in the morning about what 's to be done."

"Good-night, Mr. Mead. I 'm — I 'm awfully obliged to you for everything."

"Not at all," said Ashley. He moved towards the door. As he passed the table his eye fell on Jack's flask, which lay there. For an instant he thought of cautioning Jack against an excessive use of it; but where was the good and why was it his business? Without more he left his unwelcome guest to himself.

And Jack, being thus left alone, had some more whiskey, another look at his picture, and another smoke of his pipe. After that he began to consider how very

hardly his wife had used him. Or, rather, he tried to take up and maintain this position, but he failed. He was so genuinely relieved that Ora had not been there; he did not want to meet Ora; he knew that he would be terribly uncomfortable. Why had he come? He wandered up to the mantel-piece again and looked with pathetic reproach at the picture and the signature below it.

"I wish she hadn't made me!" he groaned as he turned away and began to undress himself.

Ora had allowed him to come, but it could hardly be said that she had made him. Moreover his protest seemed to be addressed to the picture on the mantel-piece.

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CHAPTER XIV

AS MR. FLINT SAID

IRENE KILNORTON looked, as she had been bidden, out of the window in Queen's Gate and perceived a four-wheeled cab laden with three large boxes; from that sight she turned her eyes again to Ora Pinsent, who sat in a straight-backed chair with an expression of unusual resolution on her face. It was eleven o'clock on Monday morning.

"I lay awake all night, trembling," said Ora. "Imagine if he'd come to the house!"

"But, good gracious, you told him to come, Ora! You must see him now."

"I won't. I thought you'd be kind and come with me; but I'm going anyhow."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. I suppose Ashley has done something with him; only I wonder I haven't had a letter."

"Ashley!" Lady Kilnorton's tone fully explained her brief remark, but Ora only nodded her head and repeated, "Yes, Ashley."

"And where do you propose to go?"

"Devonshire."

"And what about your theatre?"

"Oh, I've sent a wire. The understudy must do it. I couldn't possibly."

"And are you going alone to Devonshire?"

"Yes. At least I suppose Ashley couldn't go with me, could he?"

"He would if you asked him, I should think," said Irene most impatiently.

"He can run down and see me, though," observed Ora in a slightly more cheerful tone. "I shall wire my address and ask him to let me know what — what happened. Only — only I'm rather afraid to know. I should like just to leave it all to Ashley."

"I think you're quite mad."

"I was nearly, at the thought of meeting him. I wonder what Ashley did with him." A faint and timid smile appeared on her lips as she looked at her friend. "Their meeting must have been rather funny," she added, with obvious fear, but yet unable to resist confiding her amusement.

"Did anybody ever beat you, Ora?" demanded Lady Kilnorton.

"Yes, dear," confessed Ora plaintively.

"Then they didn't do it enough, that's all."

Ora sat silent for a moment still, smiling a little.

"It's no good being unkind to me," she remarked then. "I don't see how I could have done anything else. I did my very best to — to let him come; but I couldn't."

"It's not very likely you could, when you'd been spending every hour of the day with Ashley Mead! Actually took him to meet your husband!"

"I suppose it was that, partly; but I couldn't have got even as far as I did without Ashley. Why won't you come to Devonshire?"

"Among other things, I'm going to be married."

"Oh! Soon?"

"In a month."

"Really? How splendid! I should think Lord Bowdon's a lovely lover. I'm sure he would be." Ora was now smiling very happily.

Irene seemed to consider something seriously for a moment or two; then she gave it utterance.

"I'm afraid you're disreputable, after all," she said.

"No, I'm not," protested Ora. "Oh, but, my dear, how I should like to be! It would simplify everything so. But then Ashley —" She broke off and frowned pensively.

"Oh, I don't mean exactly what you've done, but what you are." She came suddenly across the room, bent down, and kissed Ora's cheek. Then, as she straightened herself again, she said, "I don't think we can be friends."

At first Ora laughed, but, seeing Irene very grave, she looked at her with scared eyes. Irene met her gaze fully and directly.

"You didn't tell me all Alice Muddock said to you," said Irene.

"No, not quite," Ora murmured; "it was horrid."

"She's told me since. Well, she only said what you've made us all think of you."

"You?" asked Ora, her eyes still set on her friend.

"Yes," said Irene Kilnorton, and, turning away, she sat down by the window. A silence followed, broken only by a stamp of the hoof from the cab-horse at the door. Then Irene spoke again. "Don't you see that you can't go on as you've been going on, that it's impossible, that it ruins everybody's life who has anything to do with you? Don't you see how you're treating your husband? Don't you see what you're doing to Ashley Mead?"

Ora had turned rather white, as she had when Alice

Muddock told her that not for the sake of fame would she pay Ora's price. They were both against her.

"How hard people are!" she cried, rising and walking about the room. "Women, I mean," she added a moment later.

"Oh, I know you make men think what you like," said Irene scornfully. "We women see what's true. I'm sure I don't want to distress you, Ora."

Ora was looking at her in despair tempered by curiosity. Bitterly as she had felt Alice's onslaught, she had ended in explaining it to herself by saying that Alice was an exceptionally cold and severe person, and also rather jealous concerning Ashley Mead. Irene Kilnorton was neither cold nor severe, and Ora had no reason to think her jealous. The agreement of the two seemed a token and an expression of a hostile world in arms against her, finding all sins in her, hopelessly blind to her excuses and deaf to the cries of her heart which to her own ears were so convincing. Irene thought that she ought to have been beaten more; if she told of Mr. Fenning's isolated act of violence, Irene would probably disapprove of nothing in it except its isolation.

"I thought you'd sympathise with me," she said at last.

"Then you must have thought me a goose," retorted Irene crossly. Her real feelings would have led her to substitute "very wicked" for "a goose," but she had an idea that an ultra-moral attitude was *bourgeois*. "Goose" gave her all she wanted and preserved the intellectual point of view.

But to Ora the moral and the intellectual were the Scylla and Charybdis between which her frail bark of emotions steered a perilous, bumping, grazing way,

lucky if it escaped entire destruction on one or the other, or (*pace* the metaphor) on both at once. She felt that the world was harsh and most ill-adapted to any reasonable being; for Ora also seemed to herself very reasonable; reason follows the habit of the chameleon and takes colour from the tree of emotions on which it lies. From her meditations there emerged a sudden terrible dread that swallowed up every other feeling, every other anxiety. All the world (must not the world be judged by these two ladies?) was against her. Her action was to it beyond understanding, her temperament beyond excuse. Would Ashley feel the same? "Have I tired him out?" she cried to herself. All else she could surrender, though the surrender were with tears; but not his love, his sympathy, her hold over him. He must see, he must understand, he must approve. She could not have him also rebelling against her in weariness or puzzled disgust. Then indeed there would be nothing to live for; even the refuge in Devonshire must become an arid tormenting desert. For the times when he could run down and see her had gone near to obliterating all the other times in her imaginary picture of the refuge in Devonshire: just as her occasional appearances had filled the whole of that picture of Ashley's married life drawn in the days of the renunciation.

She rose and bade Irene good-bye with marked abruptness; it passed as the sign of natural offence, and kindness mingled with reproach in Irene's parting kiss. But Irene asked no more questions and invited no more confidences. Ora ran downstairs and jumped into her cab. A new fear and a new excitement possessed her; she thought no more of Irene's censure; she asked no more what had become of Jack Fenning.

"What station, miss?" asked the driver, taking a look at her. He had seen her from the gallery and was haunted by a recollection.

"Oh, I'm not going to the station!" exclaimed Ora impatiently; why did people draw unwarranted inferences from the mere presence of three boxes on the roof of a cab? She gave him Ashley's address with the coolest and most matter-of-fact air she could muster. But for the terror she was in, it would have been pleasant to her to be going for the first time to those rooms of his to which she had sent so many letters, so many telegrams, so many boy-messengers, so many commissionaires, but which in actual palpable reality she had never seen yet. Reflecting that she had never seen them yet, she declared that the reproaches levelled at her were absurdly wide of the mark and horribly uncharitable. They didn't give her credit for her real self-control. But what was Ashley feeling? Again she cried, "Have I tired him out?" Now she pictured no longer from her own but from his standpoint the scene at the station, and saw how she had left him to do the thing which it had been hers to do. For the first time that day a dim half-recollected vision of the renunciation and reformation took shape in her brain; she dubbed it at once an impossible and grotesque fantasy. Ashley must have known it for that all the time; who but Ashley would have been so generous and so tactful as never to let her see his opinion of it? Who but Ashley would have respected the shelter that she made for herself out of its tattered folds? And now had she lost Ashley, even Ashley? By this time Jack Fenning, his doings, and his whereabouts, had vanished from her mind. Ashley was everything.

The laden cab reached the door; Ora was out in a

moment. "Wait," she cried, as she darted in; the driver shifted the three boxes, so as to make room for additional luggage; he understood the situation now; his fare had come to pick up somebody; they would go to the station next.

Mr. A. Mead dwelt on the first floor; on the second floor lived Mr. J. Metcalfe Brown. Having gleaned this knowledge from names in white letters on a black board, Ora mounted the stairs. The servant-girl caught a glimpse of her and admired without criticising; charity reigned here; a lady's gown was scrutinised, not her motives. Ora reached the first floor; here again the door was labelled with Ashley's name. The sight of it brought a rebound to hopefulness; the spirit of the adventure caught on her, her self-confidence revived, her fears seemed exaggerated. At any rate she would atone now by facing the problem of her husband in a business-like way; she would talk the matter over reasonably and come to some practical conclusion. She pulled her hat straight, laughed timidly, and knocked at the door. How surprised he 'd be! And if he were disposed to be unkind — well, would he be unkind long? He had never been unkind long. Why, he didn't answer! Again she knocked, and again. He must be out. This check in the plan of campaign almost brought tears to Ora's eyes.

She must enquire. She was about to go downstairs again and ring the bell when she heard a door opened on the landing above, and a man's step. She paused; this man might give her news of Ashley; that he might be surprised to see her did not occur to her. A moment later a voice she knew well exclaimed in soliloquy, "Good heavens, what a creature!" and round the bend of the stairs came Ashley himself, in a flannel jacket, smoking a pipe, with his hair much disordered.

Ora wore a plain travelling frock suitable for a dusty journey to Devonshire; her jacket was fawn colour, her hat was black; yet even by these sober hues the landing seemed illuminated to Ashley Mead. "Well!" he cried, taking his pipe from his mouth and standing still.

"Open this door," Ora commanded, in a little tumult of gladness; in an instant his eyes told her that she had not tired him out. "And who's a creature?"

"A creature?" he asked, coming down.

"Yes. You said somebody was. Oh, I know! The man above? Mr. J. Metcalfe Brown?"

"Exactly," said Ashley. "Metcalfe Brown." He took a key out of his pocket, unlocked the door, and held it open for her. He was laughing.

"So this is your den!" she cried. "What are those papers?" The desk was strewn with white sheets.

"Our Commission. I've been having a morning at it."

"Between it and Metcalfe Brown?"

"Well, yes, he does need some of my attention."

"What a noise he makes!" said Ora, for a dragging tread sounded on the ceiling of the room. "He must be rather a bore?"

"Yes, he is," said Ashley, with a short laugh and a quick amused glance at her.

"Where's my picture?" Ora demanded, looking round.

"Strictly concealed," Ashley assured her.

"I wonder I've never come here before," she reflected, sitting down in his arm-chair.

"Well, on the whole, so do I," said Ashley, laughing still.

She was taking a careful and interested view of the room. The steps overhead went on.

"I think it would be very nice," she said at last, "except for Metcalfe Brown."

"There's always something one could do without," observed Ashley Mead.

"I like you in that coat. Oh, well, I like you in any coat. But I never saw you ready for work before. Ashley, who is Metcalfe Brown? And how I wish he'd sit still!"

"He's a clerk," said Ashley; his smile persisted, but his brows were knit in a humorous puzzle.

A pause followed. Ora looked at him, smiled, looked away, looked at him again. Ashley said nothing.

"You might ask me something," she murmured reproachfully. He shook his head. She rose and came behind him; laying a hand on his shoulder she looked round in his face; mirth and appeal mingled as of old in the depths of her eyes. "Am I very dreadful?" she whispered. "Are you quite tired of me, Ashley?"

There was a sound from above as though a man had thrown himself heavily on a sofa or a bed.

"Bother Metcalfe Brown," whispered Ora. "Ashley, I couldn't help it. I was afraid."

"You needn't have been afraid with me," he said in a low voice.

"But—but you wouldn't have stayed. I was so frightened. You know what I told you; I remembered it all. He'd had too much to drink; he wasn't generally cruel, but that made him. Ashley dear, say you forgive me?"

The dim sound of a quavering voice reached them through the ceiling. For an instant Ora raised her head, then she bent down again to Ashley.

"Because I'm going away, to Devonshire," she went on. "And I mayn't see you for ever so long, unless you'll come and see me; and Irene Kilnorton says you

oughtn't to. But you must. But still it will be days! Oh, how shall I pass days without you? So do forgive me before I go."

"Forgive you!" said he with a little laugh.

"Ah, you do," she sighed. "How good you are, Ashley." She pressed his shoulder with her hand. "I couldn't go on living if it wasn't for you," she said. "Everybody else is so hard to me. I ran away last night because I couldn't bear to lose you!" She paused and moved her face nearer his, as she whispered, "Could you bear to lose me?"

Mr. Metcalfe Brown tumbled off the bed and seemed to stagger across the room towards the mantel-piece.

"No," said Ashley Mead.

"But I 'm going away; my boxes are on the cab outside. I daren't stop now he 's come; I might meet him; he might — no, I daren't stay." Her voice fell yet lower as she asked, "What did he say? Where is he? What have you done with him?"

Ashley gently raised her hand from his arm, rose, and walked to the fireplace. He looked at her as she bent forward towards him in the tremulous eagerness of her questioning, with fear and love fighting in her eyes, as though she looked to him alone both for safety and for joy. And, as it chanced, Mr. Metcalfe Brown made no sound in the room above; it was possible altogether to forget him.

Ora took the chair that Ashley had left and sat looking at him. For a moment or two he said nothing; it was the pause before the plunge, the last hasty reckoning of possibilities and resources before a great stake. Then he set all on the hazard.

"You needn't have run away," he said in a cool, almost bantering tone. "Fenning didn't turn up at all."

Mr. Metcalfe Brown walked across the room and threw himself into a chair; at least the sounds from above indicated some such actions on his part.

"I don't know why, but he didn't," said Ashley with a momentary glance at the ceiling — rather as though he feared it would fall on him.

"Not come?" she whispered. "Oh, Ashley!" She seemed for a moment to hold herself in the chair by the grasp of her hands on its arms. Then she rose and moved slowly towards him. "He didn't come?"

"Not a sign of him."

"And — and he won't, will he?"

"I don't expect so," said Ashley, smiling.

Ora seemed to accept his answer as final. She stood still, for a moment grave, then breaking into a gurgle of amused delighted laughter. Ashley glanced again at the ceiling; surely a man who had ever heard that laugh must remember it! But had the man upstairs? Was not that laugh made and kept for him himself from the beginning of the world? So his madness persuaded him.

"Rather funny, wasn't it? So I came back alone by the slow train — a very slow train it was, without you."

Ora's mood was plain enough. She was delighted, and she was hardly surprised. No instability of purpose and no change of intention were out of harmony with her idea of her husband. There was no telling why he had not come, but there was nothing wonderful in his not coming. She spread her arms out with a gesture of candid self-approval.

"Well, I've done my duty," said she.

"Yes," said Ashley, smiling. He was relieved to find his word taken so readily. "But do you think you're doing it by staying here?"

"How rude you are! Why shouldn't I?"

"It's irregular. And somebody might come." He paused and added, "Suppose Metcalfe Brown dropped in?"

"What would he think?" cried Ora with sparkling eyes. "Is he a very steady young man?"

"I don't know; he's got a picture signed 'Yours ever, Daisy,' on his mantel-piece."

Ora's eyes shewed no recognition of "Daisy."

"The girl he's engaged to, I suppose," she said rather scornfully; high and unhappy passion is a little contemptuous of a humdrum engagement.

"Perhaps," said Ashley cautiously.

"Oh, he's moving about again; and he's singing! I wish we could hear better!" For the sound of the voice was very muffled. "I know that tune though. Where have I heard it before?"

"Everybody used to torture one with it a few years ago; somebody sang it at the Alhambra."

"Oh, yes, I went with — I went once and heard it."

The voice died down in a gentle grumble. The little puzzled frown with which Ora had listened also passed away.

"Going to Devonshire?" asked Ashley Mead.

"To Devonshire? No," said Ora decisively. "Why should I go away now?"

"You must go away from here."

"Must I, Ashley?"

"Yes, you must. Consider if Metcalfe Brown —"

"Oh, bother your Metcalfe Brown! There's always somebody like that!"

"Yes, generally. Come, I'll take you to your cab —"

"But you'll come and see me to-morrow?"

"Yes, I'll come to-morrow."

"Oh, isn't everything perfect? What's that? He must be throwing the fire irons about!"

"Never mind him. Come along."

"I don't mind him. I don't mind anybody now. How could I ever have thought of bringing — of doing what I did? Why did you let me, Ashley? But it's all right now, isn't it?"

"Come down quietly; Metcalfe Brown 'll hear us."

"I don't care."

"Oh, but you must. Consider my reputation!"

"Very well, I 'll be quiet," said Ora with another low and joyous laugh.

They stole downstairs together. Metcalfe Brown was quiet; he did not open his door, look out, glance down the well of the stairs and see who was Ashley Mead's companion; he sat with his pipe in his mouth and his glass by his side, while Ora escaped in safety from the house.

The cabman had employed his leisure first in recollecting how his fare's face came to be familiar to him, secondly (since he had thus become interested in her), in examining the luggage labels on the three large boxes. There was a friendliness, and also a confidence, in his manner as he leant down from his box and said,

"Paddington, Miss Pinsent?"

"Paddington! No," said Ora. Ashley began to laugh. Ora laughed too, as she gave her address in Chelsea.

"Where I took you up, miss?" asked the cabman.

"Yes," said Ora, bright with amusement. "It really must seem rather funny to him," she said in an aside to Ashley, as she got in. The cabman himself was calling the affair "a rum start," as he whipped up

his horse. To Ashley Mead it seemed very much the same.

There were, however, two people who were not very seriously surprised, Janet the respectable servant and Mr. Sidney Hazlewood the accomplished comedian. They received Ora, at the house in Chelsea and at the theatre respectively, with a very similar wrinkling of the forehead and a very similar sarcastic curving of the lips; to both of them the ways of genius were well known. "Mr. Fenning hasn't come after all," said Ora to Janet, while to Mr. Hazlewood she observed "I felt so much better that I 've come after all." Janet said, "Indeed, ma'am." Mr. Hazlewood said, "All right," and sent word to the understudy that she was not wanted. On the whole her sudden change of plan seemed to Ora to cause less than its appropriate sensation — except to the cabman, whose demeanour had been quite satisfactory.

As Mr. Hazlewood was dressing for his part, it chanced that Babba Flint came in, intent on carrying through an arrangement rich, as were all Babba's, in prospective thousands. When the scheme had been discussed, Hazlewood mentioned Ora's wire of the morning and Ora's appearance in the evening. Babba nodded comprehendingly.

"Something to do with the husband perhaps," Hazlewood hazarded. "Not that it needs any particular explanation," he added, hiding his wrinkle with some paint.

"Husband, husband?" said Babba in a puzzle. "Oh, yes! By Jove, he was to come yesterday! Hasn't turned up, of course?"

"Haven't seen or heard anything of him."

"Of course not," said Babba placidly. "I knew he

wouldn't. I told Bowdon he wouldn't, but Bowdon wouldn't bet. Give me a wire, though."

Hazlewood's dresser was ready with a telegraph-form and Babba, in the wantonness of exuberant triumph, sent a message to Bowdon's house asserting positively that Mr. Fenning had not come. That evening Bowdon dined with Irene, and the telegram, forwarded by messenger, reached him there. After dinner Alice ran in to give news of a rather better character concerning her father. She also heard the contents of Babba Flint's message. Ora's underlying desire for a sensation would have been satisfied. They were all amazed.

"This morning she thought he had come," Irene persisted. "I wonder if Ashley Mead knows anything about it. Have you seen him, Alice?"

"No; he telegraphed that he couldn't possibly come to Kensington Palace Gardens to-day, but would early to-morrow."

Alice's tone was cold; Ashley ought to have gone to Kensington Palace Gardens that day, she thought.

"It's very odd, isn't it, Frank?" asked Irene.

"It's not our affair," said Bowdon; he was rather uncomfortable.

"Except," said Irene with a glance at Alice and an air of reserved determination, "that we have to consider a little what sort of person she really is. I don't know what to make of it, do you, Alice?"

No less puzzled was Ashley Mead as he kept guard on the man to whom he had transferred the name of Metcalfe Brown, and wondered how he was to persevere in his assertion that the man had not come. For here the man was, and, alas, by now the man was peevishly anxious to see his wife; from no affection, Ashley was ready to swear, but, as it seemed, in a sort of

fretful excitement. No doubt even to such a creature the present position was uncomfortable; possibly it appeared even degrading.

"We'll settle about that to-morrow," said Ashley Mead; and in spite of a pang of self-reproach he added, "Have a little drop more whiskey?"

For to-night must be tided over; and whiskey was the only tide that served.

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CHAPTER XV

THE MAN UPSTAIRS

KENSINGTON Palace Gardens, whither Ashley Mead hastened early on Tuesday morning, was not the same place to him as it had been. The change went deeper than any mere shadow of illness or atmosphere of affliction. There was alienation, a sense of difference, the feeling of a suppressed quarrel. The old man knew him, but greeted him with a feeble fretfulness, Lady Muddock was distantly and elaborately polite, even in Bob a constraint appeared. Alice received him kindly, but there was no such gladness at his coming as had seemed to be foreshadowed by her summons of him. Was she resentful that he had not come the day before? That was likely enough, for his excuses of pressing business did not sound very convincing even to himself. But here again he sought a further explanation and found it in a state of things curiously unwelcome to him. It may be easy to abdicate; it is probably harder to stand by patiently while the new monarch asserts his sway and receives homage. Bertie Jewett was in command at Kensington Palace Gardens; when Sir James could talk he called Bertie and conferred with him; on him now Lady Muddock leaned, to him Bob abandoned the position by birth his own; it was his advice which Alice repeated, his opinions which she quoted to Ashley Mead as they took a turn together in

the garden. Both business and family, the big house and the big block, owned a new master; Bertie's star rose steadily.

Ashley was prepared with infinite scorn. He watched the upstart with an eye acute to mark his lapses of breeding, of taste, and of tact, to discern the vulgarity through affected ease, the coarseness of mind beneath the superficial helpfulness. Something of all these he contrived to see or to persuade himself that he saw, but a whole-hearted confident contempt denied itself to him. There is a sort of man intolerable while he is making his way, while he pushes and disputes and shoulders for place; the change which comes over him when his position is won, and what he deems his rights acknowledged, is often little less than marvellous. It is as though the objectionable qualities, which had seemed so ingrained in him and so part of him that they must be his from cradle to grave and perhaps beyond, were after all only armour he has put on or weapons he has taken into his hand of his own motion, to do his work; the work done they are laid aside, or at least so hidden as merely to suggest what before they displayed offensively. So concealed, they are no longer arrogant or domineering, but only imply a power in reserve; they do no more than remind the rash of what has been and may be again. In part this great transformation had passed over Bertie Jewett; the neat compact figure, the resolute eye, the determined mouth, the brief confident directions, wrung even from Ashley admiration and an admission that, if (as poor old Sir James used to say) the "stuff" was in himself, it was in Bertie also, and probably in fuller measure. Neither business nor family would lack a good counsellor and a bold leader; neither family nor business would suffer by the substitu-

tion of Bertie for himself. Watching his successor, he seemed to himself to have become superfluous, suddenly to have lost his place in the inmost hearts of these people, and to have fallen back to the status of a mere ordinary friendship.

Was that in truth Alice's mood towards him? It was not, but his jealous acuteness warned him that it soon might be. She did not tell him now that she disliked Bertie Jewett; she praised Bertie with repentant generosity, seeking opportunities to retract without too much obtrusiveness the hard things she had said, and fastening with eager hand on all that could be commended. Ashley walked by her, listening.

"Where we should be without him now I don't know," she said. "I can't do much, and Bob — well, Bob wants somebody to guide him."

"I hope you 'll let me be of any use I can," he said; in spite of himself the words sounded idle and empty.

"You 're most kind, Ashley, always, but I don't think there 's anything we need trouble you about for the present. We don't expect any immediate change in father."

"When I said I wouldn't have anything to do with the business, I didn't include Kensington Palace Gardens in the word."

"Oh, I know you didn't. Indeed I 'll ask you for help when I want it."

He was silent for a moment or two. Then he said, "You agreed with me about the business. Do you still think I was right?"

"I 'm more than ever sure of it," she answered with a direct gaze at him. "I grow surer of it every day. It wasn't the least suited to you; nor you to it, you know." She smiled as she spoke the last words.

"And Jewett's in his element?"

"I hear he's wonderfully able, and he's very nice and considerate about everything too. Oh, no, you'd never have done for it."

What she said was what she had always said; she had always been against his selling the ribbons, had thought that he was too good to sell ribbons and loved him for this very thing. But the same words may carry most different implications; was not the idea in her head now that, if it would not have been good for him to sell the ribbons, neither would it have been good for the ribbons nor for the family whose prosperity depended on them? Her smile had been indulgent rather than admiring; he accused her of reverting to the commercial view of life and of suffering a revival of the family prejudices and of the instinct for getting and reverencing wealth. He felt further from her and detected a corresponding feeling in her. He studied her in the light of that unreasonable resentment with which Bertie Jewett inspired him; he saw that she read him in the light of her judgment of Ora Pinsent; and he knew tolerably well what she thought and said of Ora Pinsent. They were further apart. Yet at the end old kindliness revived and he clasped her hand very heartily.

"I'm always at your orders," he said. "Always."

She smiled; did she intend to remind him that the day before he had neglected her summons? His conscience gave her smile that meaning, and he could not tell her that he had been obliged to play jailer to Mr. Fenning — for Mr. Fenning had not come! But her smile was not reproachful; it was still indulgent. She seemed to expect him to say such things, to know he would, to accept them as his sincere meaning at the time, but not to expect too much from them, not to

take them quite literally, not to rely on them with the simple ample faith that the words of a solid trustworthy man receive. The love that has lived on admiration may live with indulgence; she seemed still to love him although now with opened eyes. And when he was gone, she turned back to the business of life with a sigh, to business and Bertie Jewett. Back she went to work, and in her work Ashley Mead had no longer a place.

At this time, among his conquests — and they were over himself as well as others — Bertie Jewett achieved a complete victory over Irene Kilnorton's old dislike of him. He was so helpful, so unobtrusive, so strong, so different from feather-headed people who were here one moment and elsewhere the next, whom you never knew where to have. She had what was nearly a quarrel with Bowdon because he observed that, when all was said and done, Bertie was not a gentleman.

"Nonsense, Frank," she said tartly. "He only wants to go into society a little more. In all essentials he's a perfect gentleman."

Bowdon shook his head in impenetrable, silent, male obstinacy. He was not apt at reasons or definitions, but he knew when he did and when he did not see a gentleman before him; he and his ancestors had spent generations in acquiring this luxury of knowledge. His shake of the head exasperated Irene.

"I like him very much," she said. "He has just the qualities that made me like you. One can depend on him; he's not harum-scarum and full of whims. You can trust yourself with men like that."

"I hope I'm not as dull as I sound, my dear," said Bowdon patiently.

"Dull! Who said you were dull? I said I could

trust you, and I said I could trust Bertie Jewett. Oh, I don't mean to say he's fascinating like Ashley Mead. At least I suppose Ashley is fascinating to most people."

"Most women anyhow," murmured Bowdon.

"I consider," said Irene solemnly, "that Ora Pinsent has done him infinite harm."

"Poor Miss Pinsent!"

"Oh, yes, of course it's 'Poor Miss Pinsent'! If you'd been in the Garden of Eden you'd have said nothing but 'Poor Eve'! But, Frank—"

"Yes, dear."

"I believe Alice is getting tired of him at last."

Here was a useful conquest—and a valuable ally—for Bertie Jewett. Bowdon perceived the bent of Irene's thoughts.

"Good God!" he muttered gently, between half-opened lips. Then he smiled to himself a little ruefully. Was Alice also to seek a refuge? Remorse came hard on the heels of this ungracious thought, and he kissed Irene gallantly.

"Suppose," he suggested, "that you were to be content with looking after your own wedding for the present and leave Miss Muddock to look after hers."

Irene, well pleased, returned his kiss, but she also nodded sagaciously, and said that if he waited he would see.

Bowdon was now so near his marriage, so near inviolable safety, that he allowed himself the liberty of thinking about Ora Pinsent and consequently of Ashley Mead. That the husband had not come—Babba's triumphant telegram was still in his pocket—surprised as much as it annoyed him. In absence from Ora he was able to condemn her with a heartiness which his

fiancée herself need not have despised; that his condemnation could not be warranted to outlast a single interview with its object was now no matter to him, but merely served to explain the doings of Ashley. Ashley was hopelessly in the toils, this was clear enough. Strangely hovering between self-congratulation on his own escape and envy of the man who had not run away, Bowdon asked what was to be the end, and, as a man of the world, saw but one end. Ashley would pay dear and would feel every penny of the payment. His was a nature midway between Ora's and Irene's, perhaps it had something even of Alice Muddock's; he had a foot in either camp. Reason struggled with impulse in him, and when he yielded he was still conscious of what he lost. He could not then be happy, and he would hardly find contentment in not being very unhappy. He must be tossed about and torn in two. Whither would he go in the end? "Anyhow I'm safe," was Bowdon's unexpressed thought, given new life and energy by the news that Ora Pinsent's husband had not come. For now the tongues would be altogether unchained, and defence of her hopeless. Had she ever meant him to come, ever believed that he was coming, ever done more than fling a little unavailing dust in the world's keen eyes? The memory of her, strong even in its decay, rose before him, and forbade him to embrace heartily what was Irene's and would be everybody's theory. But what other theory was there?

Bowdon was living in his father's house in Park Lane, and these meditations brought him to the door. A servant awaited him with the news that Ashley was in the library and wanted to see him. The business of their Commission brought Ashley often, and it was with only a faint sense of coincidence that Bowdon went in to

meet him. Ashley was sitting on a sofa, staring at the ceiling. He sprang up as Bowdon entered; there was a curious nervousness in his air.

"Here you are, Bowdon!" he cried. Bowdon noticed, without resenting, the omission of his title; hitherto, in deference to seniority and Bowdon's public position, Ashley had insisted on saying "Lord Bowdon." He inferred that Ashley's mind was busy.

"Here I am, Ashley. What do you want? More witnesses, more reports, what is it?"

"It's not the Commission at all."

"Take a cigar and tell me what it is."

Ashley obeyed and began to smoke quickly; he stood now, while Bowdon dropped into a chair.

"In about a month I shall have seven hundred pounds coming in," said Ashley. "Just now I've only a hundred at the bank."

"Present economy and the prospect of future recompense," said Bowdon, smiling.

"I want five hundred now, to-day. They'll give it me at the bank if I get another name. Will you —?"

"I won't give you my name, but I'll lend you five hundred."

Ashley looked down at him. "Thank you," he said. "Do you trust your servant?"

"More than you, Ashley, and I'm lending you five hundred."

"Then send him round to the bank."

"My good fellow, I can write a cheque."

"No, I want five hundred-pound notes — new ones," said Ashley, with his first glimmer of a smile.

"Very well," said Bowdon. He went to the table, wrote a cheque, rang the bell, and, when his personal servant had been summoned, repeated Ashley's request.

"Very good, my lord," said the man, and vanished. Bowdon lit a cigarette and resumed his seat.

"It's for —," Ashley began.

"As you like about that," said Bowdon. "Only why were they to be new hundred-pound notes?"

"In order to appeal to the imagination. I'm going to tell you about it."

"As long as it's because you want and not because I want, all right."

"I believe I'm going to do a damned rascally thing."

"Can't you keep it to yourself then?" asked Bowdon, with a plaintive intonation and a friendly look. "At present I've lent you five hundred. That's all! They can't hit me."

"I want somebody to know besides me, and I've chosen you."

"Oh, all right," muttered Bowdon resignedly.

Ashley walked twice across the room and came to a stand again opposite his friend.

"The notes are for Miss Pinsent's husband," said he.

Bowdon looked up quickly.

"Hullo!" said he, with lifted brows.

"I mean what I say; for Fenning."

"As the price of not coming?"

"Who told you he hadn't come?"

"Babba Flint; but it's all over the place by now."

"Babba's wrong," said Ashley. "He came on Sunday night. The notes are to bribe him to go away again."

There was a pause; then Bowdon said slowly:

"I should like to hear a bit more about this, if you don't mind, Ashley. The money's yours. I promised it. But still — since you've begun, you know!"

"Yes, I know," said Ashley quickly. "Look here, I'll tell you all about it."

The hands ticked the best part of the way round the clock while Ashley talked without pause and uninterrupted, save once when the notes were brought in and laid on the table. He told how the man had come, what the man was, how Ora had fled from him, and how, while the man moved about in the room above, he himself had told her that the man had not come. He broke off here for an instant to say, "You can understand how I came to tell her that?" On receiving Bowdon's assenting nod he went on to describe how for two days he had kept his prisoner quiet; but now he must take some step. "I must take him to her, or I must murder him, or I must bribe him," he ended, with the laugh that accompanies what is an exaggeration in sound but in reality not beyond truth.

"I don't like it," said Bowdon at the end.

"You haven't seen him as I have," was Ashley's quick retort. To him it seemed all sufficient.

"Used to beat her, did he?" Bowdon was instinctively bolstering up the case. Ashley hesitated a little in his answer.

"She said he struck her once. I'm bound to say he doesn't seem violent. Drink, I suppose. And she — well, it might seem worse than it was. Why the devil are we to consider him? He's impossible anyhow."

"I wasn't considering him. I was considering ourselves."

"I'm considering her."

"Oh, I know your state of mind. Well, and if he takes the money and goes?"

"She'll be quit of him. It'll be as it was before."

"Will it?" asked Bowdon quietly. The two men

regarded one another with a long and steady gaze. Ashley's eyes did not shirk the encounter.

"I mean that," he said at last. "But —." He shrugged his shoulders slightly. He would do his best, but he could answer for nothing. He invited Bowdon to take his stand by him, to fix his attention only on saving her the ordeal which had proved beyond her strength, just to spare her pain, to ask nothing of what lay beyond, not to look too anxiously at the tools they were using or the dirt that the tools might leave on their hands. Bowdon gained a sudden understanding of what Irene Kilnorton had meant by saying that Ora did Ashley infinite harm; but above this recognition and in spite of it rose his old cry so scorned by Irene, "Poor Ora Pinsent!" To him as to Ashley Mead the thought of carrying this man to Ora Pinsent and saying, "You sent for him, here he is," was well nigh intolerable.

They were both men who had lived, as men like them mostly live, without active religious feelings, without any sense of obligation to do good, but bound in the strictest code of honour, Pharisees in the doctrine and canons of that law, fierce to resent the most shamefaced prompting of any passion which violated it. A rebel rose against it — was it not rebellion? — drawing strength from nowhere save from the pictured woe in Ora Pinsent's eyes. They sat smoking in silence, and now looked no more at one another.

"It 's got nothing to do with me," Bowdon broke out once.

"Then take back your money," said Ashley with a wave of his hand towards the notes on the table.

"You 're on the square with me, anyhow," said Bowdon with a reluctant passing smile. He wished that

Ashley had been less scrupulous and had taken his money without telling him what use he meant to put it to.

"I tell you what, you'd better come and see the fellow," said Ashley. "That'll persuade you I'm right, if anything will."

Bowdon had become anxious to be persuaded that the thing was right, or at least so excusable as to be near enough to the right, as to involve no indefensible breach of his code, no crying protest from his honour; if the sight of the man would convince him, he was ready and eager to see the man. Besides, he had a curiosity. Ora had married the man; this adventitious interest hung about Jack Fenning still.

"Pocket the notes, and come along," he said, rising.

They were very silent as they drove down to Ashley's rooms. The affair did not need, and perhaps would not bear, much talking about; if one of them happened to put it in the wrong way they would both feel very uncomfortable; it could be put in a right way, they said to themselves, but so much care was needed for this that silence seemed safer. Bowdon was left in Ashley's rooms while Ashley went upstairs to fetch Mr. Fenning, whom he found smoking his pipe and staring out of the window. Ashley had made up his mind to carry matters with a high hand.

"I want you downstairs a minute or two," he said curtly.

"All right; I shall be jolly glad of a change," said Jack, with his feeble smile. "It's pretty slow here, I can tell you."

"Hope you won't have much more of it," Ashley remarked, as he led the way downstairs.

To suggest to a man that he is of such a disposition

as to be ready to surrender his claim to his wife's society, take himself off for good, and leave her fate in the hands of gentlemen who are not related to her in consideration of five hundred pounds, is to intimate that you hold a very peculiar opinion of him. Even with Jack Fenning Ashley felt the difficulties of the position. Bowdon gave him no help, but sat by, watching attentively. The high-handed way was the only way; but it seemed rather brutal to bully the creature.

Ashley began. In a pitiless fashion he hinted to Jack what he was, and hazarded the surmise that he set out to rejoin his wife for much the same reason which Babba Flint had thought would appeal to him. Bowdon waited for the outbreak of anger and the flame of resentment. Jack smiled apologetically and rubbed his hands against one another.

The other two exchanged a glance; their work grew easier; it seemed also to grow more disgusting. The man was passive in their hands; they had it all to do; the responsibility was all theirs.

"We propose, Mr. Fenning, that you should return to America at once, without seeing Miss Pinsent or informing her of your arrival. You have lost time and incurred expense — and — er — no doubt you 're disappointed. We shall consider all this in a liberal spirit." Ashley's speech ended here; he was inclined to add, "I 'll deal with you as one scoundrel with another."

"Go back now, without seeing her?" Was there actually a sparkle of pleasure, or relief, or thankfulness in his eye? Ashley nodded, took out the notes, and laid them on the table. Bowdon shifted his feet, lit a cigarette, and looked away from his companions out of the window.

"I have here five hundred pounds. If you 'll take the first boat and slip away without letting your — er — visit be known to anybody, I 'll hand them over to you, when you step on board."

Jack shook his head thoughtfully. "You see I 'm out of a place," he said. "I threw up my position to come."

He was haggling about the price, nothing else; Bowdon got up and opened the window.

"I made a sacrifice for the sake of returning to Miss Pinsent; my expenses have been —"

"For God's sake, how much do you want?" said Bowdon, turning round on him.

"There 's a little spec I know of —" began Jack, with a confidential smile.

"How much?" said Ashley.

"I think you ought to run to a thousand, Mr. Mead. A thousand 's not much for —"

"Doing what you 're doing? No, it 's damned little," said Ashley Mead.

"Give him the money, Ashley," said Bowdon from the window.

"All right, I 'll give it you when I see you on board. Mind you hold your tongue while you 're here!"

Jack was smiling happily; he seemed like a man who has brought off a great *coup* which was almost beyond his hopes, in which, at least, he had never expected to succeed so readily and easily. Looking at him, Ashley could not doubt that if he and Bowdon had not furnished means for the "little spec" Ora Pinsent would have been asked to supply them.

"I shall be very glad to go back. I never wanted to come. I didn't want to bother Miss Pinsent. I 've my own friends." There was a sort of bravado about him

now. "Somebody 'll be glad to see me, anyhow," he ended with a laugh.

"No doubt," said Ashley Mead; his tone was civil; he loathed Mr. Fenning more and more, but it was not the moment for him to get on moral stilts. Bowdon was as though he had become unconscious of Jack's proximity.

"There 's a boat to-morrow; I 'll try for a passage on that."

"The sooner the better," Ashley said.

"Yes, the sooner the better," said Fenning. He looked doubtfully at the two men and glanced across to a decanter of whiskey which stood on a side table.

"Then we needn't say any more," Ashley remarked, hastily gathering the crisp notes in his hand; Jack eyed them longingly. "I 'll see you again to-night. Good-bye." He nodded slightly. Bowdon sat motionless. Again Jack looked at both, and his face fell a little. Then he brightened up; there was whiskey upstairs also. "Good afternoon," he said, and moved towards the door; he did not offer to shake hands with Bowdon; he knew that Bowdon would not wish to shake hands with him; and the knowledge did not trouble him.

"Oh, Ashley, my boy, Ashley!" groaned Bowdon when the door closed behind Mr. Fenning.

"He came to blackmail her."

"Evidently. But — I say, Ashley, was he always like that?"

"Of course not," said Ashley Mead almost fiercely. "He must have been going down hill for years. Good God, Bowdon, you know the change liquor and a life like his make in a man."

"Yes, yes, of course," muttered Bowdon.

"'SOMEBODY 'LL BE GLAD TO SEE ME, ANYHOW,' HE ENDED WITH A LAUGH."—*Page 224.*

"Thank heaven we've saved her from seeing him as he is now!"

"I'm glad of that too." Bowdon rose and flung the window open more widely. "Tell you what, Ashley," he said, "it seems to me the room stinks."

Ashley made no answer; he smiled, but not in mirth.

There was a knock at the door. Ashley went to open it. Jack Fenning was there.

"I beg pardon, Mr. Mead," he said, "but if you'll give me a sheet of paper, I'll write for the passage; and I may have to pay something extra for going back by this boat."

"I'll look after that. Here's paper." And he hustled Mr. Fenning out.

At the moment a tread became audible on the stairs. Ashley stood where he was. "Somebody coming," he said to Bowdon. "Hope he won't catch Fenning!" Then came voices. The two men listened; the door was good thick oak, and the voices were dim. "I know that voice," said Ashley. "Who the deuce is it?"

"It's a man, anyhow," said Bowdon. He had entertained a wild fear that the visitor might be Ora herself; the scheme of things had a way of playing tricks such as that.

"Well, good-bye," said the voice, not Jack Fenning's. They heard Jack going upstairs; at the same moment came the shutting of his door and a knock at Ashley's. With a glance at Bowdon, warning him to be discreet, Ashley opened it. Mr. Sidney Hazlewood stood on the threshold.

"Glad to find you in," he said, entering. "How are you, Bowdon? I want your advice, Mead. Somebody's stealing a piece of mine and I thought you'd be able to tell me what to do. You're a lawyer, you see."

"Yes, in my spare time," said Ashley. "Sit down."

Hazlewood sat and began to take off his gloves.

"You 've got a queer neighbour upstairs, that fellow Foster," he said. "He told me he 'd made your acquaintance too."

"He 's only here for a day or two, and I had to be civil."

"Funny my meeting him. I used to come across him in the States. Don't you be too civil."

"I know he 's no great catch," said Ashley.

"He lived by his wits out there, and very badly at that. In fact he 'd have gone under altogether if he 'd been left to himself."

Ashley felt that Bowdon's eyes were on him, but Bowdon took no share in the talk.

"Who looked after him then?" he asked.

"His wife," said Hazlewood. "She used to walk on, or get a small part, or sing at the low-class halls, or anything you like. Handsome girl in a coarse style. Daisy Macpherson, that 's what they called her. She kept him more or less going; he always did what she told him." He paused, and added with a reflective smile, "I mean she said she was his wife, and liked to be called Mrs. Foster in private life."

This time neither Bowdon nor Ashley spoke. Hazlewood glanced at them and seemed to be struck with the idea that they were not much interested in Foster and the lady who was, or said she was, his wife.

"But I didn't come to talk about that," he went on rather apologetically. "Only it was odd my meeting the fellow."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ashley carelessly. "What 's the play, Hazlewood, and who 's the thief?"

CHAPTER XVI

MORALITY SMILES

FOR Ora Pinsent the clouds were scattered, the heavens were bright again, the sun shone. The dread which had grown so acute was removed, the necessity for losing what had come to be so much to her had passed away. And all this had fallen to her without blame, without calling for abasement or self-reproach. Nay, in the end, on a view of the whole case, she was meritorious. She had summoned her husband back; true, at the last moment she had run away from him and shirked her great scenes; but if he had really come (she told herself now) she would have conquered that momentarily uncontrollable impulse and done her duty. After a few days' quiet in the country she would have gained strength and resolution to carry out her programme of renunciation and reformation. But he had not come and now he would not come; not even a message came. He refused to be reformed; there was no need for anybody to be renounced. She had done the right thing and by marvellous good fortune had escaped all the disagreeable incidents which usually attend on correct conduct. None could blame her; and she herself could rejoice. She had offered her husband his due; yet there was nothing to separate her from Ashley or to break the sweet companionship. At last fate had shewn her a little kindness; the world unbent

towards her with a smile, and she, swiftly responsive, held out both her hands to it in welcome for its new benevolence. Trouble was over, the account was closed; she was even as she had been before the hateful letter came from Bridgeport, Connecticut. In very truth now she could hide the letter among the roses and let it lie there forgotten; the realities had fallen into line with the symbols. As for the people who were to have been edified by the reformation and comforted by the renunciation, why, Irene and Alice Muddock had both been so inexplicably harsh and unkind and unsympathetic that Ora did not feel bound to make herself miserable on their account. Irene had got her husband, Alice did not deserve the man whom Ora understood her to want. It happened that she herself was made for Ashley and Ashley for her; you could not alter these things; there they were. She lay back on the sofa with her eyes on the portrait in the silver frame, and declared that she was happier than she had been for years. If only Ashley would come! For she was rather hurt at Ashley's conduct. Here was Thursday morning and he had not been to see her. He had written very pretty notes, pleading pressing engagements, but he had not come. She was a little vexed, but not uneasy; no doubt he had been busy. She would, of course, have excused him altogether had she known that it was only on Wednesday evening that he was free from his burden and back in town, after seeing his passenger safely embarked on the boat which was to carry him and his thousand pounds back to Bridgeport, Connecticut, or somewhere equally far from the town where she was.

Although Ashley did not come, she had a visitor, and although the visitor was Babba Flint, he came not

merely in curiosity. His primary business was connected with a play. He had the handling (such was his expression) of a masterpiece; the heroine's part was made for Ora, the piece would do great things here, but, Babba asserted, even greater in America. The author wanted Ora to play in it — authors have these whims — and, if she consented, would offer his work to Mr. Hazlewood; but Hazlewood without Ora would not serve the turn.

"So I ran round to nobble you," said Babba. "You know Sidney wants to go to the States, if he can get plays. Well, mine (he had not actually written it) is a scorcher."

"Should I have to go to America?" asked Ora apprehensively.

"It's absurd you haven't been before." He proceeded to describe Ora's American triumph and the stream of gold which would flow in. "You take a share," he said. "I can offer you a share. Sidney would rather have you on a salary, but take my advice and have a share."

The conversation became financial and Ora grew apparently greedy. As Alice Muddock had noticed, she had the art of seeming quite grasping and calculating. But about going to America she gave no answer. The matter was not urgent; the thing would not become pressing for months. On being cross-questioned Babba admitted that the masterpiece was not yet written; the idea was there and had been confided to Babba; he was thunderstruck with it and advised an immediate payment of two hundred pounds. Then the masterpiece would get itself written; all wheels must be oiled if they are to run.

"And if you take half, you'll make a fortune," said Babba.

Making a fortune for a hundred pounds was the kind of operation which attracted Ora.

"I'll write you a cheque now," she said.

Babba smiled in a superior manner.

"There isn't all that hurry, as long as you're on," he observed. "Won't you give me a kiss for putting you on?"

"If it goes as you say, I'll give you a kiss — a kiss for every thousand I make," said Ora, laughing.

"There won't be any of me left," groaned Babba, with a humorous assumption of apprehension. He paused for a moment, glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and added, "But what would Mr. Fenning say?"

Ora sat on her sofa and regarded him. She said nothing; she was trying to look grave, resentful, dignified — just as Alice Muddock would look; she knew so well how vulgar Babba was and how impertinent. Alas that he amused her! Alas that just now anybody could amuse and delight her! Her lips narrowly preserved their severity, but her eyes were smiling. Babba, having taken a survey of her, fell into an appearance of sympathetic dejection.

"Awfully sorry he didn't come!" he murmured; "I say, don't mind me if you want to cry."

"You're really atrocious," said Ora, and began to laugh. "Nobody but you would dare," she went on.

"Oh, I believe in him all right, you know," said Babba, "because I've seen him. But most people don't, you know. I say, Miss Pinsent, it'd have a good effect if you advertised; look *bonâ fide*, you know."

"You mustn't talk about it, really you mustn't," said

Ora, with twitching lips. It was all wrong (Oh, what would Alice Muddock say?), but she was very much amused. If her tragedy of renunciation would turn to a comedy, she must laugh at the comedy.

"Keep it up," said Babba, with a grave and sincere air of encouragement. "Postpone him, don't give him up. Let him be coming in three months. It keeps us all interested, you know. And if you positively can't do anything else with him, divorce him."

Ora's eyes turned suddenly away.

"Anyhow don't waste him," Babba exhorted her. "I tell you there's money in him."

"Now you must stop," she said with a new note of earnestness. It caught Babba's attention.

"Kick me, if you like," said he. "I didn't know you minded, though."

"I don't think I did, much," said Ora. Then she sat up straight and looked past Babba with an absent air. She had an idea of asking him what he thought of her in his heart. He was shrewd under his absurdities, kind under his vulgarity; he had never made love to her; in passing she wondered why. But after all nobody thought Babba's opinion worth anything.

"Do you remember meeting Miss Muddock here?" she enquired.

"Rather," said Babba. "I know her very well. Now she's a good sort — reminds you of your mother grown young."

"Well, she thought you detestable," said Ora. The praise of Alice was not grateful to her, although she acknowledged the aptness of Babba's phrase.

"Yes, she would," said he cheerfully. "I've got to shoulder that, you know. So have we all, if it comes to that."

"We all! What do you mean?" Ora did not seem amused now.

"Oh, our sort," said Babba. "I'll leave you out, if you particularly wish it."

"Just tell me what you mean."

"Can't, for the life of me," said Babba. "Have a cigarette?" He held out his case; Ora took a cigarette. They both began to smoke. "But we give her fits," he went on in a meditative tone, as of a man who recognised facts, although he disclaimed all power of explaining them. "I tell you what, though —" he resumed; but again he paused.

"Well?" said Ora irritably.

"That's the sort to marry," said Babba, and put his cigarette in his mouth with a final air.

"Ask her, then," said Ora, with an uncomfortable laugh.

"I think I see myself!" smiled Babba. "How should we mix?"

Ora rose from the sofa and walked restlessly to the window. Her satisfaction with the world was shadowed. She decided to tell Babba nothing of what Alice Muddock, nothing of what Irene Kilnorton, had said to her. For, strange as it seemed, Babba would understand, not ridicule, appreciate, not deride, be nearer endorsing than resenting. He would not see narrow, ignorant, uncharitable prejudice; it appeared that he would recognise some natural inevitable difference, having its outcome in disapproval and aloofness. Was there this gulf? Was Babba right in sitting down resignedly on the other side of it? Her thoughts flew off to Ashley Mead. On which side of the gulf was he? And if on the other than that occupied by "our sort," would he cross the gulf? How would he cross it?

"Well, you 'll bear the matter of the play in mind," said Babba, rising and flinging away his cigarette.

"Oh, don't bother me about plays now," cried Ora impatiently.

Babba stood hat in hand, regarding her critically. He saw that she was disturbed; he did not perceive why she should be. The change of mood was a vagary to be put up with, not accounted for; there was need of Mr. Hazlewood's philosophy. He fell back on raillery.

"Cheer up," he said. "He 'll turn up some day."

"Stop!" said Ora, with a stamp of her foot. "Go away."

"Not unpardoned?" implored Babba tragically. Ora could not help laughing, as she stretched out her hand in burlesque grandeur, and allowed him to kiss it.

"Anyhow, we 'll see you through," he assured her as he went out, casting a glance back at the slim still figure in the middle of the room.

Partly because he had not come sooner, more from the shadow left by this conversation, she received Ashley Mead when he arrived in the afternoon with a distance of manner and a petulance which she was not wont to show towards him. She had now neither thanks for his labours in going to meet Mr. Fenning nor apologies for her desertion of him; she gave no voice to the joy for freedom which possessed her. Babba Flint had roused an uneasiness which demanded new and ample evidence of her power, a fresh assurance that she was everything to Ashley, a proof that though she might be all those women said she was, yet she was irresistible, conquering and to conquer. And her triumph should not be won by borrowing weapons or tactics from the enemy. She would win with her own sword, in her own way, as herself; she

had rather exaggerate than soften what they blamed in her; still she would achieve her proof and win her battle.

There seemed indeed no battle to fight, for Ashley was very tender and friendly to her; he appeared, however, a little depressed. Pushing her experiment, she began to talk about Irene and Alice, and, as she put it, "that sort of woman."

"But they aren't at all the same sort of woman," he objected, smiling.

"Oh, yes, they are, if you compare them with me," she insisted, pursuing the path which Babba's reflections had shewn her.

"Well, they've certain common points as compared with you, perhaps," he admitted.

"They're good and I'm not."

"You aren't alarmingly bad," said Ashley, looking at her. He was wondering how she had come to marry Fenning.

"Look at my life and theirs!"

"Very different, of course." They had never been joined in bonds of union with Fenning.

She leant forward and began to finger the flowers in her vase.

"It would have been better," she said, "if Jack had come. Then you could have gone back. I know you think you're bound not to go back now."

He took no notice of her last words, and asked no explanation of what "going back" meant.

"I'd sooner see you dead than with your husband," he said quietly.

Forgetting the flowers, she bent forward with clasped hands. "Would you, Ashley?" she whispered. The calm gravity of his speech was sweet incense to her.

Speaking like that, he surely meant what he said! "How could you help me to bring him back, then?"

"I hadn't quite realised the sort of man he must be."

"Oh!" This was not just what she wanted to hear. "There's nothing particular the matter with him," she said.

"The things you told me—"

"I daresay I was unjust. I expect I exasperated him terribly. I used rather to like him—really, you know."

"You wouldn't now," said Ashley with a frown. The remark seemed to shew too much knowledge. He added, "I mean, would you?"

"Now? Oh, now—things are different. I should hate it now." She rose and stood opposite to him. "What's the matter?" she asked. "You're not happy to-day. Is anything wrong?"

He could not tell her what was wrong, how this man whom she had so unaccountably brought into her life seemed first to have degraded her and now to degrade him. To tell her that was to disclose all the story. He could throw off neither his disgust with himself nor his discontent with her. She had not asked him to borrow money and bribe Jack Fenning to go away; it was by no will of hers that he had become a party to the sordid little drama which Hazlewood's information enabled him to piece together. All she saw was that he was gloomy and that he did not make love to her. He should have come in a triumph of exultation that their companionship need not be broken. Her fears were ready with an explanation. Was Babba Flint right? Was the companionship unnatural, incapable of lasting, bound to be broken? She looked down on him, anger and entreaty fighting in her eyes.

"I believe you're sorry he didn't come," she said, in

a low voice. "Do you want to get rid of me? You 've only to say so, if that 's what you want."

"I 'm not sorry he didn't come," said Ashley, with a smile.

"Now you 're amused. What at?"

"Oh, the way things happen! Among all the things I thought you might say to me, I never thought of your telling me that I was sorry he hadn't come." He raised his eyes to hers suddenly. "Do you know anything about what he does out there?" he asked.

"No; he never wrote, except that once. I don't want to know; it doesn't matter to me."

"One letter in five years — isn't it five? — isn't much."

"Oh, why should he write? We separated for ever."

"But then he proposed to come."

"Dear me, don't be logical, Ashley. You see he didn't come. I suppose he had a fit of something and wrote then." She paused, and added with a smile, "Perhaps it occurred to him that I used to be attractive."

"And then he forgot again?"

"I suppose so. Why do you talk about him? He 's gone!" She waved her hand as though to scatter the last mist of remembrance of Jack Fenning.

"Perhaps he wanted to get some money out of you," said Ashley.

"You aren't flattering, Ashley."

"Ah, my dear, a man who does what I do may say what I say."

Something in his words or tone appealed to her. She knelt down by his chair and looked up in his face.

"You do all sorts of things for me, don't you?"

"All sorts."

"And you hate a good many of them?"

"Some."

"And your friends hate all of them for your sake! I mean Irene, and Miss Muddock, and so on. Ashley, would you do anything really bad for me?"

"I expect so."

"I don't care; I should like it. And when you'd done it I should like to go and tell Alice Muddock all about it."

"She wouldn't care." His voice sounded sincere, not merely as though it gave utterance to the proper formal disclaimer of an unloved lady's interest in him. Ora did not miss the ring of truth.

"Has she begun not to care?" she asked.

"If you choose to put it in that way, yes," he answered, with a shrug of his shoulders. "You see, we go different ways."

The talk seemed all of different ways and different sorts to-day.

"Yes, I know," she answered, drawing a little back from him, but not rising from her knees. Ashley was not looking at her, but, resting his head on his hands, gazed straight in front of him; he was frowning again. "What are they saying about Jack not coming?" she asked suddenly.

"What they would," said Ashley, without turning his head. "You know; I needn't tell you."

"Oh, yes, I know. Well, what does it matter?"

"Not a ha'penny," said Ashley Mead. It was not what they said that troubled him; what they said had nothing to do with what he had done.

"Ashley," she said, with an imperative note in her voice, "I know exactly what I ought to do; I've read it in a lot of books." Her smile broke out for a mo-

ment. "Most books are stupid — at least the women in them are. I was stupid before — before Jack didn't come, and I thought I 'd do it. Well, I won't. I don't believe you 'd be happier. I won't give you up, I won't let you go."

Ashley turned on her with a smile.

"Nothing equals the conceit of women," he said. "They always think they can settle the thing. Whatever you say, I 've not the least intention of being given up." It crossed his mind that to allow himself to be given up now would be a remarkable piece of ineptitude, when he had sacrificed a thousand pounds, and one or two other things, in order to free himself and her from the necessity of their renunciation.

"Wouldn't you go if I told you?"

"Not I!"

"Well then, I 've half a mind to tell you!" Her tone was gay; Babba Flint's inexplicable convictions and voiceless philosophy were forgotten. The man she loved loved her; what more was there to ask? She began to wonder how she had strayed from this simple and satisfactory point of view; didn't it exhaust the world? It was not hers to take thought for him, but to render herself into his hands. Not ashamed of this weakness, still she failed to discern that in it lay her overwhelming strength. She stretched out her hands and put them in his with her old air of ample self-surrender, of a capitulation that was without condition because the conqueror's generosity was known of all. "What are we worrying about?" she cried with a low merry laugh. "Here are you, Ashley, and here am I!" And now she recollected no more that this kind of conduct was exactly what seemed horrible to Alice Muddock and wantonly wicked to Irene Kilnorton.

In this mood her fascination was strongest; she had the power of making others forget what she forgot. Ashley Mead sat silent, looking at her, well content if he might have rested thus for an indefinite time, with no need of calculating, of deciding, or of acting. As for her, so for him now, it was enough. With a light laugh she drew her hands away and sprang to her feet. "I wish I hadn't got to go to the theatre," she exclaimed. "We 'd dine somewhere together. Oh, of course you 're engaged, but of course you 'd break it. You 'd just wire, 'Going to dine with Ora Pinsent,' and they 'd all understand. They couldn't expect you to refuse that for any engagement; you see, they know you 're rather fond of me. Besides they 'd all do just the same themselves, if they had the chance." So she gave rein to her vanity and her triumph; they could not but please him since they were her pæan over his love for her.

Till the last possible moment he stayed with her, driving with her to the theatre again as in the days when the near prospect of the renunciation made indiscretion provisional and unimportant. He would not see her act; it was being alone with her, having her to himself, which was so sweet that he could hardly bring himself to surrender it. To see her as one of a crowd had not the virtue that being alone with her had; it brought back, instead of banishing, what she had made him forget — the view of the world, what she was to others, and what she was to himself so soon as the charm of her presence was removed. He left her at the door of the theatre and went off to keep his dinner engagement. With her went the shield that protected him from reflexion and saved him from summing up the facts of the situation.

Morality has curious and unexpected ways of justify-

ing itself, even that somewhat specialised form of morality which may be called the code of worldly honour. This was Ashley Mead's first reflexion. A very stern character is generally imputed to morality; people hardly do justice nowadays to its sense of humour; they understood that better in the old days. "The Lord shall have them in derision." Morality is fond of its laugh. Here was his second thought, which came while a vivacious young lady gave him her opinion of the last popular philosophical treatise. To take advantage of Mr. Hazlewood's carelessly dropped information, to follow up the clue of the good-for-nothing Foster and the masterful Daisy Macpherson, to set spies afoot, to trace the local habitation of the "little spec," and to find out who formed the establishment that carried it on — all this would be no doubt possible, and seemed in itself sordid enough, with its sequel of a divorce suit, and the notoriety of the proceedings which Miss Pinsent's fame would ensure. Yet all this might possibly have been endured with set teeth and ultimately lived down, if only it had chanced that Mr. Hazlewood had been to hand with his very significant reminiscences before Lord Bowdon and Ashley Mead had made up their minds that Jack Fenning must be got out of the way, and that a thousand pounds should buy his departure and bribe him not to obtrude his society upon the lady who was his wife. That Mr. Hazlewood came after the arrangement was made and after the bargain struck was the satiric touch by which morality lightened its grave task of business-like retribution. What, if any, might be the legal effect of such a transaction in the eyes of the tribunal to which Miss Pinsent must be persuaded to appeal, Ashley did not pretend to know and could not bring himself seriously

to care. The impression which it would create on the world when fully set forth (and he knew Jack Fenning too well to suppose that it would not be declared if it suited that gentleman's interest) was only too plain. The world perhaps might not understand Bowdon's part in the affair; probably it would content itself with surmises about something lying in the past and with accompanying sympathetic references to poor Irene Kilnorton; but its judgment of himself, of Jack Fenning, and of Ora Pinsent was not doubtful. Would the world believe that Ora knew nothing about the manner of Jack's coming and the manner of Jack's going? The world was not born yesterday! And about Ashley Mead the world would, after a perfunctory pretence of seeking a charitable explanation, confess itself really unable to come to any other than one conclusion. The world would say that the whole thing was very deplorable but would not attempt to discriminate between the parties. "Six of one and half-a-dozen of the other." That would be the world's verdict, and, having arrived at it, it would await the infinitely less important judgment of the Court with a quiet determination not to be shaken in its view of the case.

To pursue a path that ended thus was to incur penalties more degrading and necessities more repugnant than could lie in an open defiance of this same world with its sounding censures and malicious smiles. To defy was in a way respectable; this would be to grovel, and to grovel with no better chance than that of receiving at last a most contemptuous pardon. "Six of one and half-a-dozen of the other." He would be paired off with Jack Fenning, Ora coupled with the masterful Daisy Macpherson. Let them fight it out among themselves — while decent people stood aloof with their

noses in the air, their ears open, and their lips as grave as might be. Such was the offer of peace which morality, certainly not serious beyond suspicion, made to Ashley Mead; if he would submit to this, his offence touching that matter of the thousand pounds and the burking of Mr. Fenning's visit should be forgotten. Better war to the death, thought Ashley Mead.

But what would Bowdon say? And what would be the cry that echoed in the depths of Ora's eyes?

He asked the question as he looked at her picture. Suddenly with an oath he turned away; there had come into his mind the recollection of Jack Fenning's ardent study of Miss Macpherson's face.

Mutato nomine de te: — and does the name make such a difference?

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CHAPTER XVII

AT SEA AND IN PORT

TO Irene Kilnorton, occupied with the matter against her will and in face of self-contempt, the non-appearance of Jack Fenning was a source of renewed irritation and uneasiness. She could not smile with the world nor agree to dispose of the subject with the cynical and contented observation that she had never supposed the man would come and had her doubts about there being such a man at all. Her consideration of it was bound to be more elaborate, her view more individual. Hence came the self-contempt and anger which afflicted her without affecting facts. For the present indeed Ora was infatuated with Ashley Mead, a position of affairs deplorable on general grounds but reassuring on personal; but then where was her safety, what security had she? She let injustice trick her into panic — with such as Ora the infatuation of Monday afternoon might be followed by a new passion on Tuesday morning. The mixture of jealousy with her moral condemnation caused Irene to suffer an unhealthy attraction to the subject; she could not help talking about it; she talked about it with Bowdon to his great discomfort. He was not a good dissembler; he could respect a secret, but his manner was apt to betray that there was a secret; he was restless, impatient, now and then almost rude, when Irene harped on the

string of Jack Fenning's strange behaviour. Or was it not Ora's? Had Ora at the last moment, for reasons unquestionably sufficient, countermanded her husband? Bowdon was pathetic in his plea of ignorance, but the plea did not ring true. Thus she was sore with her *fiancé*, vexed with Ashley Mead, and furious against Ora Pinsent. Yet, being a woman of the world, she was polite to Ora when they met, friendly if severe to Ashley, and, as has been said, interested in both of them with a reluctant intensity.

Any strangeness there might be in her own attitude was suggested to her for the first time by the very different behaviour of her friend Alice Muddock. Here she found a definiteness of mind, a resolution, and a relentlessness which she hardly knew whether to laugh at, to shudder at, or to admire. She knew what Ashley had been to Alice; she remembered how in the beginning Alice had taken a liking to Ora Pinsent. Yet now her own anger could hardly seem deep or serious beside Alice's silent condemnation; her moral disapproval, with its copious discussion and its lively interest, was mere frippery compared with her friend's eloquent ignoring of the very existence of the culprits. Having dropped in to talk the whole thing over, Irene was amazed to find that she was ashamed to introduce the subject. "I suppose I'm not really moral at all," thought Irene with a moment's insight into the radical differences between her friend and herself, between the talkative shockedness of society and the genuine grieved concern which finds in silence its only possible expression. "And I brought Ora here!" Irene reflected in mingled awe and amusement; her deed seemed now like throwing a lighted squib into a chapelfull of worshippers. "It's a little bit absurd,"

was suggested by her usual way of looking at things. "Quite proper, though," added her jealousy of Ora Pinsent. But the habitual had the last word with her. "I suppose the Muddocks were brought up in that way," she ended.

Alice had been brought up in that way; from that way she had struggled to escape with the help of some uncertain intellectual lights; but the lights had drawn their flickering radiance from the flame of her love for Ashley Mead. So long as she could she had believed the best, or had at least refused to believe the worst. But the lights did not now burn brightly, their oil gave out, and the prejudices (if they were prejudices) began to gather round, thick and darkening. A lax judgment on a matter of morals seldom survives defeat suffered at the hands of the sinner. This fortuitous buttressing of righteousness is all to the good. Yet because she did not see how her own feelings joined forces with her idea of right, how the fact of the argosy being laden with her own hopes intensified in her eyes the crime of the pirate, Alice Muddock became hard to the sinners as well as justly severe on their censurable doings; and, from having once tried to understand and excuse them, grew more certain that they could put forward no mitigating plea. Weeks passed and Ashley Mead was not asked to Kensington Palace Gardens.

"It's a little inhuman; she was fond of him," thought Irene. Then came a flash of light. "Bertie Jewett!" she cried inwardly, and her lips set in the stoniness of a new disapproval. Much as Bertie had conciliated her, the reaction went too far for Lady Kilnorton's taste. It is very well to be estimable, but it is very ill to be estimable and nothing else; and she thought that Bertie was nothing else, unless it were that he was also a little

vulgar; to Bowdon she had denied this; to herself she admitted it.

Yet she was very wrong. He might be vulgar; he was estimable; but he was much besides; hence it happened that the thing which seemed to her so impossible was in a fair way to come about. Old Sir James was dying, and stayed his last tottering steps on Bertie Jewett's arm; Bob came home day by day to tell how all the business hung on Bertie Jewett; Bob's echo, Lady Muddock, was of course in the same cry; the potent influence of the household, which so encircles the individual, ringed Alice round with the praises of Bertie Jewett. She had no passion for him, but now it seemed to her that passions were of doubtful advantage and that she at least was not meant for them; the idea of having one had been part of her great mistake. Bertie lay right on the true lines of her life, as training and fate — as God, she said to herself — had planned them for her; if she followed them, would she not come to Bertie? All this was much, yet not enough had he been only estimable. He was strong also, strong to advance and strong to wait; the keenness of his pale blue eyes saved him here as it saved him in the bargains that he made. It shewed him his hour and the plan of his attack. With cautious audacity he laid his siege, letting his deeds not his words speak for him, trusting not to his words but to his deeds to disparage his rival. The man had the instinct for success — or seemed to have it, because his desires and capabilities were so nicely adjusted and of such equal range. He could not have written a poem, but he never wanted to. Ora Pinsent would have suffered under him as under a long church service; but then he would never have tried to please that lady.

"Do you really like him?" Irene asked Alice as they walked in the garden.

"Yes," said Alice thoughtfully. "I really like him now."

"Oh, because he 's helpful and handy, and looks after you all!"

"No, there 's something more than that." She frowned a little. "You can rely on him; I don't mean to do things so much as to be things — the things you expect, you know. I think the one terrible thing would be to have to do with a person who was all fits and starts; it would seem as though there was no real person there at all."

"That 's what I always feel about Ora Pinsent." Irene took courage and introduced the name deliberately.

"Yes," Alice assented briefly. Irene had no doubt that she was thinking of Miss Pinsent's friend also, and when she came to report the conversation to Bowdon this aspect of it took the foremost place.

"If she marries Mr. Jewett," said Irene, "it 'll be just in a recoil from Ashley Mead."

Bowdon did not look at her but at the end of the cigarette which he was smoking by the window in Queen's Gate. He had no difficulty in understanding how a recoil might land one in a marriage; this was to him trodden ground.

"She 'll be happier with him," Irene continued. "Ora has quite spoilt Ashley for any other woman."

Bowdon agreed that Miss Pinsent might very likely have some such effect, but he expressed the view quite carelessly.

"Besides, really, how could any self-respecting woman think of him now, any more than any man could of her?"

Bowdon made no answer to this question, which was, after all, purely rhetorical.

"But, hang it, Jewett!" he remarked after a pause.

"I know," said Irene, forgetting her former dialectical championship of Bertie. The matter was serious now. "She needn't have taken quite such an extreme remedy; but he was on the spot, you see; and — and it's the business. She's falling right back into the business, over head and ears and all. It's rather sad, but —" It seemed as though she meant that it was better than linking fortunes with a being all fits and starts. She rose and came near him. "I think we're just about right, you and I, Frank," she said. "We aren't Jewetts and we aren't Oras. I think we're the happy compromise."

"You are, no doubt, my dear. I'm a dull dog," said Bowdon.

She looked at him for a moment and turned away with a little sigh. The marriage was very near; was the work yet fully done, or had fits and starts still their power over him and their attraction for him? He made a remark the next moment which vexed her intensely.

"Well, you know," he said with a thoughtful smile, "I expect we seem to Miss Pinsent just what Jewett seems to us."

Irene walked away and sat down in a chair on the other side of the room.

"I'm sure I don't care what I seem to Ora Pinsent," she said very coldly; but Bowdon smoked on in pensive silence.

At this time both the triumph and the activity of Babba Flint were great. He was divided between the masterpiece of dramatic writing at whose birth he was assisting, and the masterpiece of prescience which he

had himself displayed touching the matter of Mr. Fenning's return. When he contemplated these two achievements (and he took almost as much personal credit for the first as for the second) he said openly that he ought to find excuse for being "a bit above himself." It was no use to tell him that he was not writing the play, and neither of the men who knew chose to tell him that he had been wrong in regard to Jack Fenning. Thus left to a blessed self-conceit, he obtruded on Ashley Mead certain advice which was received with a curious bitter amusement.

"If I were you, I'd find out something about the fellow," he said. "I mean — why didn't he come?" He looked very sly. "*Cherchez la femme*," he added.

"And if I found her?" asked Ashley.

"Oh, well, you know best about that," said Babba. He conceded that it was entirely for Ashley to say whether he would greet a chance of establishing his relations with Ora on a regular and respectable basis. "But, depend on it, she's there," he added, waving his hand in the supposed direction of the United States.

"I shouldn't wonder at all," Ashley remarked, his recollection fixed on Miss Macpherson's portrait.

"Now if we all go over in the winter —" began Babba.

"You all? Who do you mean?"

"Why, if we take the play. Have I told you about —?"

"Oh, Lord, yes, Babba, twenty times. But I'd forgotten."

"Well, if Hazlewood and Miss Pinsent and I go — we can't ask you, I'm afraid, you know — we can nose about a bit."

Ashley looked at him with a helpless smile; the pic-

ture conjured up by his expression lacked no repulsive feature. Here was a hideously apt summary of the prospect which had been in his own thoughts; if he followed the clue, he must nose about or get somebody to nose about for him.

"Shut up, Babba," he commanded, rudely enough; but Babba smiled and told him to think it over. Babba did not recognise any defect in the manner of offering his services or anything objectionable in the substance of them. He had flung open a door; he could not be expected to guarantee the cleanliness of the threshold, since he had not a very fine eye with which to guide the broom.

Whatever Ashley might think about the opportunities supposed to be afforded by the suggested excursion to America, he could not avoid giving consideration to the tour itself. The London season drew to a close; Mr. Hazlewood wanted to make his plans; Babba and his associates were urgent for a Yes or a No. If Ora said Yes, after a brief rest she would set to work at rehearsals and in a few weeks cross the seas; if she said No, she had the prospect of a long holiday, to be spent how she would, where she would, with whom she would. This position of affairs raised the great question in a concrete and urgent form; it pressed itself on Ashley Mead; he began to wonder when it would make an impression on Ora. For up to the present time she did not seem to have looked ahead; she had fallen back into the state of irresponsible happiness from which her husband's letter had roused her. She considered the tour with interest and even eagerness, but without bringing it into relation with Ashley Mead; in other moments she talked rapturously about the delights of a holiday, but either ignored or

tacitly presupposed the manner and the company in which she was to spend it. She never referred to her husband; she had, and apparently expected to have, no letter from him. He was gone; Ora seemed as unconscious of the problem to which his disappearance gave rise as she was ignorant of the means by which the disappearance had been brought about. She had left to Ashley the decision as to whether she should or should not undertake the renunciation and reformation; so she appeared to leave it to him now to make up his mind what must be done since the reformation had become impossible and the renunciation of no effect. Meanwhile she was delightfully happy.

It was this unmeditated joy in her which made it at once impossible for Ashley to leave her and impossible to shape plans by which he should be enabled to stay with her. To do either was to spoil what he had, was to soil a simple perfection, was to run up against the world, against the world's severe cold Alice Muddocks with their scorn of emotions, and its Babba Flints with their intolerable manœuvres and hints of profitable nosings. That a choice of courses should be forced on him became irksome. Things were very well as they were; she was happy, he was happy, Jack Fenning was gone, and — well, some day he would pay Lord Bowdon a thousand pounds.

He was in this mood when the American tour faced him with its peremptory summons, with its business-like calculations of profit, its romantic involving of despair, its abominable possibilities of nosing. Babba spoke of it to him, so did Mr. Hazlewood, both with an air of curiosity; Ora herself speculated about it more and more, sometimes in her artistic, sometimes in her financial, sometimes in her fatalistic mood. She was

strange about it; now she would talk as though he were to be with her, again as if he were to be at work here at home and his letters her only comfort. She never faced facts; she did not even look at them from the corner of an eye, over the shoulder.

"Shall I go or not?" she would ask him, as though it were a question between keeping some trivial engagement and breaking it for a pleasanter. "Now, shall I go, Ashley dear?"

Had she no notion of what things meant? Away from her he often asked this question; when he was with her, it died away on his lips. Then he declared that, if he could so cheat necessity and beguile the inevitable from its path, she should never know what things meant, never take a hard reckoning with the world, never be forced to assess herself. She had forgotten what Irene and what Alice had said to her, or had persuaded herself that they spoke for form's sake, or in jealousy, or in ignorance, or because their clergyman had such influence over them, or for some such cause. She was now as simply unreasoning as she was simply happy; she was altogether at his disposal, ready to go or stay, to do what he ordered, even (as he knew) to leave him in tears and sorrow, if that were his will. She left it all to him; and, having it all left to him, he left it to Mr. Hazlewood, to Babba Flint, or to any other superficially inadequate embodiment in which the Necessary chose to clothe itself.

But Bowdon's thousand pounds? Such a man as Ashley — or as his creditor — will be careless of all things in earth or heaven save a woman's secret, his given word, the etiquette of his profession, and a debt of honour. The thousand pounds was in the fullest sense a debt of honour. He had not a thousand pounds.

To save was impossible while Ora went everywhere with him. Money to her was like manna and seemed to entail the same obligation that none of the day's bounty should be left to the next morning. Ashley was hard-up; the prosaic fact shot across his mental embarrassments in a humorous streak. He laughed at it, at himself when he bought Ora bouquets or the last fancy in blotting-pads, at her when she asked him for a sovereign, because she had no place convenient for the carrying of a purse. At a word she would have repaid, and besides flung all she had into his hands. But that word he would not speak. The Commission drew near to its close; brief bred brief but slowly; and as long as he owed Bowdon a thousand pounds he seemed to himself more than criminal. But did he owe it? Yes, a thousand times. For if he did not, then Bowdon was something more to Ora Pinsent than a chance acquaintance or a friend's *fiancé*. He acknowledged the hearty good comradeship which had shewn itself in the loan; but it had been a loan; only by repaying it could he appropriate the service to himself and remove another's offering from the shrine at which he worshipped.

Matters standing in this position, time, with its usual disregard of the state of our private affairs, brought on the wedding of Irene Kilnorton and Lord Bowdon. Irene had found no sufficient reason for objecting to Ashley's presence. Logic then demanded that an invitation should be sent to Miss Pinsent. As it chanced, it pleased Ora to come in conspicuous fashion, in a gown which the papers were bound to notice, in a hat of mark, rather late, full of exuberant sympathy with the performance. She arrived only a minute before the bride, while Bowdon and Ashley Mead stood side by side close to the altar-rails. Both saw her the moment

she came in, both looked at her, neither made any comment on her appearance. As soon as the procession entered she made an effort to relapse into decorous obscurity, but, willy-nilly, she halved attention with the proper heroine of the day. A wedding affected Ora; the ready tears stood in her eyes as the solemn confident vows were spoken. Ashley almost laughed as he listened to Bowdon's; he had a sudden sense that it would be rather absurd if Ora and he took such vows; he had a distinct knowledge that the woman of whom he himself thought was in the minds of bride and bridegroom also. He glanced at her, she smiled at him with her innocent disregard of appearances. He looked the other way and found Alice Muddock with eyes firm set on her prayer-book. The officiating minister delivered a little discourse, one of his own writing, in lieu of the homily. Looking again, Ashley found Alice's eyes on the minister with a grave meditative gaze, as though she weighed his words and assessed the duties and the difficulties they set forth; but Ora was glancing round the church, finding acquaintances. When the ceremony ended and they had come out of the vestry, he walked past Ora in the wake of the procession. Ora smiled in a comprehending, rather compassionate way; her emotion was quite gone. Now she seemed to bid him take the ceremony for what it was worth. He had watched to see whether Bowdon looked at her; Bowdon had not looked. That was because the ceremony had seemed of importance to him. Ashley broke into a smile; it would have been more encouraging, if also more commonplace, had Ora's tears not been so obviously merely a tribute to the literary gifts of the composers of the service.

At the reception afterwards — it was quiet and small

— one thing happened which seemed to have a queer significance. He found Ora, and took her round the rooms. As they made their circuit they came on Alice Muddock; she was talking to Bertie Jewett. She looked up, bowed to Ashley, and smiled; she took no notice at all of Ora Pinsent. Ashley felt himself turn red, and his lips shaped themselves into angry words; he turned to Ora. Ora was looking the other way. She had been cut; but she had not seen it; she had not noticed Alice Muddock. But Ashley understood that the two women had parted asunder, that to be the friend of one was in future not to be a friend to the other.

It was a queer moment also when Ora, full again of overflowing emotions, flung herself on Irene's breast, kissed her, blessed her, praised her, prayed for her, laughed at her, lauded her gown, and told her that she had never looked better in her life. Irene laughed and returned the kiss; then she looked at her husband, next at Ashley, lastly at Ora Pinsent. There was a moment of silent embarrassment in all the three; Ora glanced round at them and broke into her low laugh.

"Why, what have I done to you all?" she cried. "Have I hypnotised you all?"

Bowdon raised his eyes, let them rest on her a moment, then turned to Ashley Mead. The two women began to talk again. For a moment the two men stood looking at one another. They had their secret. Each telegraphed to the other, "Not a word about the thousand!" Then they shook hands heartily. Ora and Ashley passed on. For a moment Bowdon looked after them. Then he turned to his bride and found her eyes on him. He took her hand and pressed it. Her eyes were bright as she looked at him for an instant before

a new friend claimed her notice. As she greeted the friend, Bowdon gave a little sigh.

He was in port! But the laughing, dancing, buffeting, dangerous waves are also sweet.

"I 'm glad I went," said Ora, as Ashley handed her into her victoria. She laughed as she lay back on the cushions.

"It was so funny at my wedding," she said. "Jack lost the ring." She waved her hand merrily as she was driven away.

"Come soon," she cried over her shoulder.

He waved his hand in response and turned to go back into the house. In his path stood Bertie Jewett. For an instant Ashley stood still.

"I suppose it 's about over," he said carelessly.

"Just about. I must get back to the shop," said Bertie, looking at his watch. But he did not move. Ashley, glancing beyond him, saw Alice Muddock coming towards the door.

"So must I," he said, clapping on his hat and hailing a hansom. He jumped in and was carried away.

One of Bowdon's servants brought his walking-stick to his rooms the next day. He had forgotten it in a passing recollection of old days, when Alice and he used to laugh together over the manœuvres by which they got rid of Bertie Jewett.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PLAY AND THE PART

BABBA Flint's dramatic masterpiece progressed and took shape rapidly. "The beggar's got at it at last," Babba said, in one of his infrequent references to the author. Mr. Hazlewood did not talk much, but was plainly of opinion that there might be a great deal of money made. Ora was enthusiastic. She had seen the scenario and had read the first draft of the great scene in the third act. The author had declared his conviction that no woman save Ora could play this scene; Ora was certain that it would be intolerable to her that any other woman should. She did not then and there make up her mind to play it, but it began to be certain that she would play it and would accept such arrangements of her life and her time as made her playing of it possible. In this way things, when suggested or proposed, slid into actual facts with her; they grew insensibly, as acquaintances grow; she found herself committed to them without any conscious act of decision. "Let her alone, she'll do it," said Hazlewood to Babba, and Babba did no more than throw out, on the one side, conjectures as to the talent which certain ladies whom he named might display in the *rôle*, and, on the other, forecasts of the sure triumph which would await Ora herself. Finally he added that Ora had better see the whole piece before she arrived at a

conclusion. Hazlewood approved and seconded these indirect but skilful tactics. With every such discussion the play and the part made their footing more and more secure in Ora's mind. She began to talk as though, in the absence of unforeseen circumstances, she would be "opening" in New York with the play and the part in October; when she spoke thus to Ashley Mead, the old look of vague questioning was in her eyes; it seemed to him as though the old look of apprehension or appeal were there also, as though she were a little afraid that he would forbid her to go and prevent her from playing the part. But in this look lay the only reference that she made to her present position, and her only admission that it held any difficulties. His answer to it was to talk to her about the play and the part; this he could not do without the implied assumption that she would act the part in the play, would act it with Sidney Hazlewood, and would act it in America in October.

What these things that were gradually insinuating themselves into the status of established facts meant to him he began to see. For the play was nothing to him, he had no share in the venture, and certainly he could not tour about the United States of America as a superfluous appendage to Mr. Hazlewood's theatrical company. The result was that she would go away from him, and that the interval before she went grew short. Up to the present time there was no change in their relations; as they had been before the coming and going of Jack Fenning, they were still. But such relations must in the end go forward or backward; had he chosen, he knew that they would have gone forward; more plainly than in words she had left that to him; but he had left the decision to the course of events, and

that arbiter was deciding that the relations should go backward. She loved him still, tenderly always, sometimes passionately; but the phase of feeling in which her love had been the only thing in the world for her was passing away, as the counter-attraction of the play and the part increased in strength. The rest of her life, which love's lullaby had put to sleep, was awaking again. In him a resignation mingled with the misery brought by his recognition of this; unless he could resort to the "nosings" which Babba Flint suggested, he would lose her, she would drift away from him; he felt deadened at the prospect but was not nerved to resist it. He was paralysed by an underlying consciousness that this process was inevitable; the look in her eyes confirmed the feeling in him; now she seemed to look at him, even while she caressed him, from across a distance which lay between them. His encounter with Bertie Jewett after the wedding had been the incident which made him understand how he had passed out of Alice Muddock's life, and she out of his, his place in hers being filled by another, hers in his left empty. The fatalism of his resignation accepted a like ending for himself and Ora Pinsent. Presently she would be gone; there was no use in trying to weld into one lives irrevocably disassociated by the tendency of things. This was the conclusion which forced itself upon him, when he perceived that she would certainly act in the play and certainly go to America in the autumn.

The mists of love conceal life's landscape, wrapping all its features in a glowing haze. Presently the soft clouds lift, and little by little the scene comes back again; once more the old long roads stretch out, the quiet valleys spread, the peaks raise their heads; the

traveller shoulders his knapsack and starts again on his path. He has lingered; here now are the roads to traverse and the peaks to climb; here is reality; where is that which was the sole reality? But at first the way seems very long, the sack is very heavy, and the peaks — are they worth the climbing?

"What's the matter, Ashley? You're glum," she said one day, after she had been describing to him the finest situation in the finest part in the finest play that had ever been written. It was a week before her theatre was to close and before a decision as to plans for the future must be wrung from her by the pressure of necessity.

The thought of how he stood had been so much with him that suddenly, almost without intention, he gave voice to it. She charmed him that day and he felt as though the inevitable must not and somehow could not happen, as though some paradox in the realm of fact would rescue him, as a witty saying redeems a conversation which has become to all appearance dull beyond hope of revival.

"I'm losing you, Ora," he said slowly and deliberately, fixing his eyes on her. "You'll take this play; you'll go to America; you're thinking more about that than anything else now."

A great change came on her face; he rose quickly and went to her.

"My dear, my dear, I didn't mean to say anything of that sort to you," he whispered as he bent over her. "It's quite natural, it's all as it should be. Good God, you don't think I'm reproaching you?" He bent lower still, meaning to kiss her. She caught him by the arms and held him there, so that he could come no nearer and yet could not draw back; she searched his face,

then dropped her hands and lay back, looking up at him with quivering lips and eyes already full of tears. Blind to his feelings as she had been, yet her quickness shewed them all to her at his first hint, and she magnified his accusation till it grew into the bitterest condemnation of her.

"You 've given simply everything for me," she said, speaking slowly as he had. "I don't know all you 've done for me, but I know it 's a great deal. I told you what Alice Muddock said I was; you remember?" She sprang to her feet suddenly and threw her arms round his neck; "I love you," she whispered to him; it was apology, protest, consolation, all in one. "Ashley, what do I care about the wretched play? Only I — I thought you were interested in it too. How lovely it would be if we could act it together!" Her smile dawned on her lips. "Only you 'd be rather funny acting, wouldn't you?" she ended with a joyous little laugh.

Ashley laughed too; he thought that he would certainly be funny acting; yet he was sure that if he could have acted with her he need not have lost her.

"But I think I liked you first because you were so different from all of them at the theatre," she went on, knitting her brows in a puzzled frown. He might have recollected that Alice Muddock had liked him because he was so different from all of them in Buckingham Palace Road. Well, Alice had turned again to Buckingham Palace Road, and Bertie Jewett's star was in the ascendant. "I should hate to have you act," she said, darting her hand out and clasping his.

They sat silent for some moments; Ora's fingers pressed his in a friendly understanding fashion.

"There 's nobody in the world like you," she said. He smiled at the praise, since his reward was to be to

lose her. Things would have their way, and he would lose her. As Alice back to the business, as Bowdon back to a suitable alliance, so she back to her theatre. As for himself, he happened to have nothing to go back to; somewhat absurdly, he was glad of it.

"All sorts of stupid people are quite happy," Ora reflected dolefully. "Everything seems to be arranged so comfortably for them. It's not only that I married Jack, you know."

She was right there, although she rather underrated the importance of the action she mentioned. Even without Jack there would have been difficulties. But her remark brought Jack, his associations and his associates, back into Ashley Mead's mind. "Perhaps I shall run across Jack in America," she added a moment later.

It was indeed not only Jack, but it was largely Jack. Jack, although he was not all, seemed to embody and personify all. Ashley's love for her was again faced and confronted with his distaste for everything about her. Herself he could see only with his own eyes, but her surroundings he saw clearly enough through the eyes of a world which did not truly know her — the world of Irene Bowdon, almost the world of Alice Muddock. Could he then take her from her surroundings? That could be done at a price to him definite though high; but what would be the price to her? The answer came in unhesitating tones; he would be taking from her the only life that was hers to live. Then he must tell her that? He almost laughed at the idea; he knew that he would not be able to endure for a second the pain there would be in her eyes. To wrench himself away from her would torture her too sorely; let her grow away from him and awake some day to find herself content without him.

"And what a fool all my friends would think me!" he reflected. But the reflexion did not weigh with him; he had protected her life from the incursion of Jack Fenning, he would protect it from his own tyranny. He leant forward towards her and spoke to her softly.

"Take the play, Ora," he said; "take the part, go to America, and become still more famous. That's what you can do and what you ought to do."

"And you? Will you come with me?"

"Why no," he said, smiling. "I must stay and roll my little stone here. Yours is a big stone and mine only a little one, but still I must roll my own."

"But I shall be away months."

"Yes, I know, long months. But I won't forget you."

"You won't really? I should die if you forgot me, Ashley. If I go I shall think of you every hour. Oh, but I'm afraid to go! I know you'll forget me."

He had but little doubt that the forgetfulness would come, and that it would not come first from him. She had no inkling of the idea that she could herself cease to feel for him all that she felt now. She extracted from him vows of constancy and revelled in the amplitude of his promises. Presently her mind overleapt the months of absence, saw in them nothing but a series of triumphs which would make him more proud of her, and a prospect of meeting him again growing ever nearer and nearer and sweetening her success with the approaching joy of sharing it all with him and telling him all about it. Anything became sweet, shared with him; witness the renunciation!

"If I hadn't you, I shouldn't care a bit about the rest of it," she said. "But somehow having you makes me want all the rest more. I wonder if all women are like that when they're as much in love as I am."

Ashley knew that all women were by no means like that, but he said that he suspected they were, and assured Ora that the state of feeling she described was entirely consistent with a great and permanent love. As, before, his one object had been to support her through the renunciation, to make it easy and possible for her, so now he found himself bending his energies and exerting his ingenuity to persuading her that there was no incompatibility between her love and her life, between her ambition and her passion, between him and the masterpiece for whose sake she was to leave him. He had seen her once in despair about herself and dared not encounter a second time the pain which that sight of her had given him; he himself might know the truth of what she was and the outcome of what she did; he determined that, so far as he could contrive and control the matter, she should not know it. She should go and win her triumph, she should go in the sure hope that he would not change, in the confidence that she would not, that their friendship would not, that nothing would. Then she would dry her tears, or weep only in natural sorrow and with no bitterness of self-accusation. It seemed worth while to him to embark again on oceans of pretence for her sake, just as it had seemed worth while to pretend to believe in the renunciation, and worth while to break his code by bribing Jack Fenning with a borrowed thousand pounds.

At this time a second stroke fell on old Sir James Muddock; worn out with work and money-making, he had no power to resist. The end came swiftly. It was announced to Ashley in a letter from Bertie Jewett. Lady Muddock was prostrate, Bob and Alice overwhelmed with duties. Bertie begged that his letter might be regarded as coming from the family; he

shewed consideration in the way he put this request and assumed his position with delicacy. Ashley read with a wry smile, not blaming the writer but wondering scornfully at the turn of affairs. The old man had once been almost a father to him, the children near as brother and sister; now Bertie announced the old man's death and the children pleaded that they were too occupied to find time to write to him. He went to the funeral; through it all his sense of being outside, of having been put outside, persisted, sharing his mind with genuine grief. From whatever cause it comes that a man has been put outside, even although he may have much to say for himself and the expulsion be of very questionable justice, it is hard for him to avoid a sense of ignominy. Ashley felt humiliation even while he protested that all was done of his own choice. He spoke to the Muddocks no more than a few kind but ordinary words; he did not go to the house. Bertie invited him there and pressed the invitation with the subdued cordiality which was all that the occasion allowed; but he would not go on Bertie's invitation. The resentment which he could not altogether stifle settled on Bob. Bob was the true head of family and business now. Why did Bob abdicate? But he had himself been next in succession; Bob's abdication would have left the place open for him; he had refused and renounced; he could not, after all, be very hard on poor Bob.

Again a few days later came a letter from Bertie Jewett. This time he made no apology for writing; he wrote in his official capacity as one of Sir James's executors. By a will executed a month before death Sir James left to Ashley Mead, son of his late partner, the sum of one thousand pounds to be paid free of legacy

duty. Ashley had no anger against the old man and accepted this acknowledgment of his father's position without contempt; it was not left to him but to his father's son; before the will was made he had been put outside.

"He might have left you more than that," said Ora.

"You see, I wouldn't go into the business," Ashley explained.

"No, and you wouldn't do anything he wanted," she added with a smile.

"It's really very good of him to leave me anything."

"I don't call a thousand pounds anything."

"That's all very well for you, with your wonderful play up your sleeve," said Ashley, smiling. "But, as it happens, a thousand pounds is particularly convenient to me, and I'm very much obliged to poor old Sir James."

For armed with Bertie Jewett's letter he had no difficulty in obtaining an overdraft at his bank and that same evening he wrote a cheque for a thousand pounds to the order of Lord Bowdon. In allotting old Sir James's money to this particular purpose he found a curious pleasure. The Muddock family had been hard on Ora and hard on him because of Ora; it seemed turning the tables on them a little to take a small fraction of their great hoard and by its means to make them benefactors to Ora, to make them *ex post facto* responsible for Jack Fenning's departure, and to connect them in this way with Ora's life. His action seemed to forge another link in the chain which bound together the destinies of the group among which he had moved. Sir James would have given the thousand for no such purpose; he had not laboured with any idea of benefiting Ora Pinsent. Bowdon would not

like taking the thousand pounds; he had desired to lay his own gift at Ora's feet. But Sir James being dead should give, and Lord Bowdon being his lady's husband should take. So Ashley determined and wrote his cheque with a smile on his lips. Things turned out so very oddly.

"What have you done with your legacy?" asked Ora. When money came in to her, she always "did something" with at least a large proportion of it; in other words she got rid of it in some remarkable, salient, imagination-striking manner, obtaining by this means a sense of wealth and good fortune which a mere balance at the bank, whether large or small, could never give.

Ashley looked up at her as she stood before him.

"I've paid an old debt with it," he said. "I was very glad to be able to. I'm quite free now."

"Were you in debt? Oh, why didn't you tell me? I've got a lot of money. How unkind of you, Ashley!"

"I couldn't take your money," said Ashley. "And I wasn't pressed. My creditor wouldn't have minded waiting for ever."

"What an angel!" said Ora. She was a little surprised that under the circumstances Ashley had felt called upon to pay.

"Exactly," he laughed. "It was Bowdon."

"He's got lots of money. I wonder he takes it."

"I shall make him take it. I borrowed it to get something I wanted, and I don't feel the thing's mine till I've paid him off."

"Oh, I understand that," said Ora.

"Don't tell him I told you."

"All right, I won't. I don't suppose I shall get a chance of telling Lord Bowdon anything. Irene was

like ice to me at the wedding." In reality Irene had not failed to meet with a decent cordiality the outpouring of Ora's enthusiasm.

"Confound you, I didn't want it," was Lord Bowdon's form of receipt for the cheque; he scribbled it on half a sheet of note paper and signed it "B." This was just what Ashley had expected, and he found new pleasure in the constraint which he had placed on his friend's inclination. He shewed the document to Ora when he next went to see her.

"You were quite right," he said. "Bowdon didn't want the money. Look here."

Ora read the scrawl and sat turning it over and over in her fingers.

"But he had to take it," said Ashley with a laugh of triumph, almost of defiance.

"I should think he'd be a very good friend," said Ora. "If Irene would let him, I mean," she added with a smile. "Do you think he'd lend me a thousand pounds and not want it paid back?" she asked.

"From my knowledge of him," said Ashley, "I'm quite sure he would."

"People do an awful lot of things for me," said Ora with a reflective smile. She paused, and added, "But then other people are often very horrid to me. I suppose it works out, doesn't it?"

Ashley was engaged in a strenuous attempt to make it work out, but he had little idea in what way the balance of profit and loss, good and evil, pleasure and pain, was to be arrived at.

"You'd do simply anything for me, wouldn't you?" she went on.

Although he had certainly done much for her, yet he felt himself an impostor when she looked in his face and

asked him that question. There seemed to him nothing that he would not suffer for her, no advantages, no prospects, and no friendships that he would not forgo and sacrifice for her. But he would not "do simply anything for her." There was much that he would not, as it appeared to him could not, do for her. Else what easier than to say, "We know so-and-so about your husband, and we can find out so-and-so by using the appropriate methods"? What easier than to say, "I'll go in your train to America, and while you win the triumphs I'll do the nosing"? For if he said that to her, if he opened to her the prospect of being rid, once and for all, of Jack Fenning, of levelling the only fence between him and her of which she was conscious, of enabling her to keep her masterpiece and her triumphs and yet not lose her lover, her joy would know no bounds and the world be transfigured for her into a vision of delight. But yet he could not. All was hers short of negativing himself, of ceasing to be what he was, of gulfing his life, his standards, his mind in hers. She judged by what she saw, and set no bounds to a devotion that seemed boundless. But to him her praise was accusation, and he charged himself with giving nothing because he could not give all.

Ora understood very little why he suddenly caught her in his arms and kissed her. But she thought it a charming way of answering her question.

"Poor Ashley!" she sighed, as she escaped from his embrace. She had occasional glimpses of the imperfection of his happiness, just as she had occasional pathetic intuitions of what her own nature was.

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CHAPTER XIX

COLLATERAL EFFECTS

ON the whole Irene Bowdon felt that she ought to thank heaven, not perhaps in any rapturous outpouring of tremulous joy, but in a sober give-and-take spirit which set possible evil against actual good, struck the balance, and made an entry of a reasonably large figure on the credit side of the sheet. Surely it was in this spirit that sensible people dealt with heaven? If once or twice in her life she had not been sensible, to repeat such aberrations would little become an experienced and twice-married woman. You could not have everything; and Lord Bowdon's conduct had been extremely satisfactory. Only for two days of one week had he relapsed into that apparent moodiness, that alternation of absent-mindedness with uncomfortable apologies, which had immediately succeeded the offer of his hand. On this occasion something in a letter from Ashley Mead seemed to upset him. The letter had a cheque in it, and Irene believed that the letter and cheque vexed her husband. She had too much tact to ask questions, and contented herself, so far as outward behaviour went, with Bowdon's remark that Ashley was a young fool. But her instinct, sharpened by the old jealousy, had loudly cried, "Ora Pinsent!" She was glad to read in the papers that Ora was to go to America. Yes, on the whole she would thank heaven, and

assure herself that Lord Bowdon would have made her his wife anyhow; that is, in any case, and without — She never finished the phrase which began with this "without."

So Ora Pinsent was going to America. Surely madness stopped somewhere? Surely Ashley Mead would not go with her? Irene had never given up hopes of Ashley, and at this first glimmer of a chance she was prepared to do battle for him. She had never quite reconciled herself to Bertie Jewett; her old dislike of the ribbon-selling man and the ribbon-selling atmosphere so far persisted that she had accepted, rather than welcomed, the prospect of Bertie. She wrote and begged Alice Muddock to come across to tea. She and Bowdon were in her house in Queen's Gate, his not being yet prepared to receive her. She fancied that she saw her way to putting everything right, to restoring the *status quo ante*, and to obliterating altogether the effect of Ora Pinsent's incursion; she still felt a responsibility for the incursion. Of course she was aware that just now matrimonial projects must be in the background at Kensington Palace Gardens; but the way might be felt and the country explored.

"Mr. Jewett, Mr. Jewett, Mr. Jewett;" this seemed the burden of Alice's conversation. The name was not mentioned in a romantic way, nor in connexion with romantic subjects; it cropped up when they talked of the death, of the funeral, of the business, of money matters, future arrangements, everything that goes to make up the ordinary round of life. Alice was quite free from embarrassment and shewed no self-consciousness about the name; but its ubiquity was in the highest degree significant in Irene's eyes. She knew well that the man who has made himself indispensable has gone more

than half-way towards making any other man superfluous, and she seemed to be faced with the established fact of Bertie Jewett's indispensability. The time would come when he would ask his reward; either he must receive it or he must vanish, carrying off with him all the comfort his presence had given and breaking the habit of looking to him and leaning on him which had become so strong and constant. If Irene meant to enter the lists against Bertie, she would be challenging an opponent who knew how to fight.

"Have you seen anything of Ashley Mead?" she asked, as she lifted the teapot and poured out the tea.

"He came to the funeral, but of course we had no talk, and he's not been since."

"You haven't been asking people, I suppose?"

"We haven't asked him," said Alice calmly. She took her tea and looked at her hostess with perfect composure.

"He couldn't come just now without being invited, you know," Irene suggested.

"Perhaps not," said Alice, rather doubtfully. "I don't think he wants to come." She paused, and then added deliberately, "And I don't want him to come." Now she flushed a very little, although her face remained steady and calm. She did not seem to shrink from the discussion to which her friend opened the way. "It would be nonsense to pretend that he's what he used to be to us," she went on. "You know that as well as I do, Irene."

"I don't know anything about it," declared Irene pettishly. "I think you're hard on him; all men are foolish sometimes; it doesn't last long." Had not Lord Bowdon soon returned to grace, soon and entirely?

"Oh, it's just that you see what they are," said Alice.

She set down her cup and gazed absently out of the window. Irene was irritated; her view had been that momentary weaknesses in a man were to be combated, and were not to be accepted as final indications of what the man was; she had acted on that view in regard to her husband, and, as has been stated, on the whole she thanked heaven. She thought that Alice also might, if she chose, bring herself to a position in which she could thank heaven moderately; but it was not to be done by slamming the door in the face of a prodigal possibly repentant. She cast about for a delicate method of remarking that Ora Pinsent was going to America.

"It was quite inevitable that he should drift away from us," Alice continued. "I see that now. I don't think we're any of us bitter about it."

"He needn't go on drifting away unless you like."

"It isn't very likely that I should make any efforts to call him back," said Alice, with a faint smile.

"Why not?" asked Irene crossly.

"Well, do women do that sort of thing?"

"Why, of course they do, my dear."

Alice's smile expressed a very clear opinion of such conduct, supposing it to exist. Irene grew red for an instant and pushed her chair back from the table. Anger makes delicate methods of remarking on important facts seem unnecessary.

"You know Ora Pinsent's off to America?" she asked.

"No, I know nothing of Miss Pinsent's movements," said Alice haughtily. "I don't read theatrical gossip."

Irene looked at her, rose, and came near. She stood looking down at Alice. Alice looked up with a smile; the irritation in both seemed to vanish.

"Oh, my dear girl, why must you be so proud?"

asked Irene, with a nervous little laugh. "You cared for him, Alice."

"Yes; all the world knew that. I didn't realise, though, quite how well they knew it."

"And now you don't?"

Alice's eyes did not leave her friend's face as she paused in consideration.

"I don't suppose I shall ever be so happy as I used to think I should be with Ashley Mead," she said at last. "But I couldn't now. I should always be thinking of — of what's been happening lately. Irene, I loathe that sort of thing, don't you?"

"Oh, with men it 's just — " Irene began.

"With some sort of men, I suppose so," Alice interrupted. "I tried to think it didn't matter, but — Could you care for a man if you knew he had done what Ashley has?"

In ninety hours out of a hundred, in ninety moods out of a hundred, Irene would have been ready with the "No" that Alice expected so confidently from her; with that denial she would instinctively have shielded herself from a breath of suspicion. But now, looking into the grave eyes upturned to hers, she answered with a break in her voice,

"Yes, dear; we must take what we can get, you know." Then she turned away and walked back to her tea-table; her own face was in shadow there, and thence she watched Alice's, which seemed to rise very firm and very white out of the high black collar of her mourning gown. She loved Alice, but, as she watched, she knew why Ashley Mead had left her and given himself over to Ora Pinsent; she had not often seen so nearly in the way men saw. Then she thought of what Bertie Jewett was; he could not love as this girl deserved to be loved.

"And we don't always get what we deserve," she added, forcing another nervous laugh. "Most women have to put up with something like what you mean, only they're sensible and don't think about it."

"I'm considered sensible," said Alice, smiling.

"Sensible people are only silly in different ways from silly people," Irene declared, with a touch of fresh irritation in her voice. "Well then, it's no use?" she asked.

"It's no use trying to undo what's done." Alice got up and came and kissed her friend. "It was like you to try, though," she said.

"And I suppose it's to be—?"

"It's not to be anybody," Alice interrupted. "Fancy talking about it now!"

"Oh, that's conventional. You needn't mind that with me."

"Really I'm not thinking about it." But even as she spoke her face grew thoughtful. "Our life's arranged for us, really," she said. "We haven't much to do with it. Look how I was born to the business!"

"And you'll go on in the business?"

"Yes. I used to think I should like to get away from it. Perhaps I should like still; but I never shall. There are terribly few things one gets a choice about."

"Marriage is one," Irene persisted, almost imploringly.

"Do you think it is, as a rule?" asked Alice doubtfully.

Their talk had drawn them closer together and renewed the bonds of sympathy, but herein lay its only comfort for Irene Bowdon. The disposition that Alice shewed seemed clearly to presage Bertie Jewett's success and to prove how far he had already progressed. She wondered to find so much done and to see how Ashley

had lost his place in the girl's conception of what her life must be. "I should have fought more," Irene reflected, and went on to ask whether that were not because she also felt more than her friend, or at least differently; did not the temperament which occasioned defeat also soften it? Yet the girl was not happy; she was rather making the best of an apparently necessary lack of happiness; life was a niggard of joy, but by good management the small supply might be so disposed as to make a good show and so spread out as to cover a handsome space. Against the acceptance of such a view Irene's soul protested. It was dressing the shop-window finely when there was no stock inside.

"I shouldn't mind what a man had thought," she said, "if I could make him think as I wanted him to now."

"No, but you'd know him too well to imagine that you ever could," said Alice.

A little inhuman, wasn't it? The old question rose again in Irene's mind, even while she was feeling full of sympathy and of love. It was all too cold, too clear-sighted, too ruthless; if you were very fond of people, you did not let yourself know too well what you did not wish to think about them; you ought to be able to forget, to select, to idealise; else how could two people ever love one another? There must be a partiality of view; love must pretend. She could fancy Ashley's humorously alarmed look at the idea of living in company with perfect clear-sightedness. As for Ora — but surely the objection here would come even sooner and more clamorously from clear-sightedness itself?

"I daresay you're right, dear, but it doesn't sound very encouraging," she said. "I declare it's a good

thing I'm married already, or I should never have dared after this!"

"If it is like that, we may just as well admit it," said Alice, with a smile and a sigh. "I must go back," she added. "Mr. Jewett's coming to dinner to talk over some business with me."

Business and Mr. Jewett! That indeed seemed now the way of it. Irene kissed her friend with rueful emphasis.

At this time Lady Muddock, while conceiving herself prostrate and crushed under the blow which had fallen on her, was in reality very placid and rather happy. As a dog loves his master she had loved her husband; the dog whines at the master's loss, but after a time will perceive that there is nobody to prevent him from having a hunt in the coverts. A repressive force was removed, and Lady Muddock enjoyed the novel feeling of being a free agent. And everything went very well according to her ideas. Minna Soames, whose father had been a clergyman, and who had sung only at concerts, would become her daughter-in-law, and Bertie Jewett her son-in-law; Minna would cease to sing, and Bertie would carry on the business; Bob would be perfectly happy, and Alice would act with true wisdom and presently find her reward. She had a sense of being at home in all things, of there being nothing that puzzled or shocked or upset her. She disliked the unfamiliar; she had therefore disliked Ora Pinsent, even while she was flattered by knowing her; but it was just as flattering and at the same time more comfortable to have known and voluntarily to have ceased to know her. As for Ashley Mead, he had never let her feel quite at ease with him; and the society which he had been the means of bringing to the house was not the

sort which suited her. She made preparations for taking a handsome villa at Wimbledon; to that she would retire when Bob brought his bride to Kensington Palace Gardens. In a word, the world seemed to be fitting itself to her size most admirably.

Bowdon had been paying a visit of condolence to her while Alice was with his wife — so Irene had contrived to distribute the quartette — and discovered her state of mind with an amusement largely infected with envy. His own life was of course laid on broader lines than hers; there was a wider social side to it and a public side; but he also had come to a time of life and a state of things when he must fit himself to his world and his world to him, much in Lady Muddock's fashion — when things became definite, vistas shortened, and the actual became the only possible. The return of his thousand pounds typified this change to him; it closed an incident which had once seemed likely to prevent or retard the process of settling down to which he was now adapting and resigning himself; he admitted with a sigh that he had put it off as long as most men, and that, now it was come, it had more alleviations for him than for most. Well, the ground had to be cleared for the next generation; theirs would be the open playing-fields; it was time for him to go into the house and sit down by the fire. What was there to quarrel with in that? Did not *placens uxor* sit on the other side of the hearth? And though tempests were well enough in youth, in advanced years they were neither pleasant nor becoming. But he wished that it was all as grateful to him as it was to Lady Muddock.

Alice came in before he left and took him to walk with her in the garden. The burden of her talk chimed in with his mood; again she dwelt on the view that one's

place was somewhere in the world, that by most people at all events it had only to be found, not made, but that sorrow and a fiasco waited on any mistake about it. She spoke only for herself, but she seemed to speak for him also, expressing by her subdued acquiescence in giving up what was not hers, and her resolute facing of what was, the temper which he must breed in himself if he were to travel the rest of the way contentedly.

"But it's a bit of a bore, isn't it?" he asked, suddenly standing still and looking at her with a smile.

"Yes, I suppose it's a bit of a bore," said she. Then she went on rather abruptly, "Have you seen Ashley since you came back?"

"Only once, for a moment at the club."

"Is he getting on well? Will he do well?"

"If he likes," said Bowdon, shrugging his shoulders. "But he's a queer fellow."

"I don't think he quite agrees with us in what we've been saying."

"I don't know about that. At any rate I fancy he won't act on it."

"There's no use talking about it," she said with an impatience only half suppressed. "He's so different from what he used to be."

"Not so very, a little perhaps. Then you're a little different from what you used to be, aren't you?"

She looked at him with interest.

"Yes?" she said questioningly.

"Add the two little differences together and they make a big one."

"A big difference between us?"

"That's what I mean. I feel the same thing about him myself. He's not for settling down, Miss Muddock."

"Oh, I suppose we both know why that is," she said. "We needn't mention names, but—"

"Well, we know how it is even if we don't know why it is; but it isn't all Miss Pinsent, or—" He paused an instant and ended with a question. "Or why doesn't he settle down there?"

She seemed to consider his question, but shook her head as though she found no answer. To adduce the obvious objection, the Fenning objection, seemed inconsistent with the sincerity into which their talk had drifted.

"I tell you what," said Bowdon, "I'm beginning to think that it doesn't much matter what sort a man is, but he ought to be one sort or the other. Don't you know what I mean?"

She walked by his side in silence again for a few minutes, then she turned to him.

"Are we contemptuous, or are we envious, or what are we, we people of one sort?" she asked.

"On my honour I don't know," answered Bowdon, shaking his head and laughing a little.

"I think I'm contemptuous," she said, and looked in his face to find an equal candour. But he did not give his decision; he would not admit that he inclined still a little towards the mood of envy. "Anyhow it must be strange to be like that," she said; she had thought the same thing before when she sat in the theatre, watching Ora Pinsent act. Then she had watched with an outside disinterested curiosity in the study of a being from another world who could not, as it had seemed, make any difference to her world or to her; but Ora had made differences for her, or at least had brought differences to light. So the various lines of life run in and out, now meeting and now parting, each following its own curve, lead where it may.

"I must run away," said Bowdon, "or I shall keep my wife waiting for dinner."

"And I must go and dress, or I shall keep Mr. Jewett waiting for dinner."

They parted with no more exchange of confidence than lay in the hint of a half-bitter smile. Lord Bowdon walked home to Queen's Gate, meditating on the Developments and Manifestations of the Modern Spirit. He yielded to fashion so far as to shape his phrase in this way and to affix mental capital letters to the dignified words. But in truth he was conscious that the affair was a very old one, that there had been always a Modern Spirit. In the state of innocency Adam fell, and in the days of villainy poor Jack Falstaff; the case would seem to be much the same with the Modern Spirit. Still there is good in a label, to comfort the consciences of sinners and to ornament the eloquence of saints.

The eloquence of saints was on the lips of his wife that evening when they dined together, and Bowdon listened to it with complete intellectual assent. He could not deny the force of her strictures on Ashley Mead nor the justness of her analysis of Ora Pinsent. But he did not love her in this mood; we do not always love people best when they convince us most. Ashley was terribly foolish, Ora seemed utterly devoid of the instinct of morality, intimated Irene.

"No," said Bowdon, with a sudden undeliberated decisiveness, "that 's just what she 's got. She hasn't anything else, but she has that."

The flow of Irene's talk was stemmed; she looked across at him with a vexed enquiring air.

"You 've not seen anything like so much of her as I have," she objected. "Really I don't see what you can

know about it, Frank. Besides men never understand women as women do."

"Sometimes better, and I'm quite right here," he persisted. "Why did she send for her husband?"

"I don't think there was ever any real question of his coming." This remark was not quite sincere.

"Oh, yes, there was," said Bowdon with a smile. The smile hinted knowledge and thereby caused annoyance to his wife. How did he come to know, or to think he knew, so much of Ora? But it was no great thing that had inspired his protest; it was only the memory of how she once said, "Don't."

"I'm going to see her," Irene announced in resolute tones. "I used to have some influence over her, and I'm going to try and use it. I may do some good."

"In what direction, dear?" There was a touch of scepticism in Bowdon's voice.

"About Ashley Mead. I do believe everything could be made happy again. Frank, I'm not reconciled to Bertie Jewett yet."

Bowdon shook his head; he was reconciled to Bertie Jewett and to the tendency of events which involved the success of Bertie Jewett.

"And she ought to go back to her husband," Irene pursued.

The Modern Spirit had not, it must be presumed, left Lord Bowdon entirely untouched, else he could not have dissented from this dictum; or was it only that a very vivid remembrance of Mr. Fenning rose in his mind?

"I'm hanged if she ought," he said emphatically. "And if you only knew what the fellow's like—" He came to a sharp stop; his wife's surprised eyes were set on his face.

"You don't know what he's like, you've never seen him; you told me so, long ago, when I first got to know her." Lord Bowdon appeared embarrassed. "Wasn't it true?" asked Irene severely.

"Yes, it was true," he answered, and truly, for, at the time he said it, it had been true.

"Then how do you know what he's like?" she persisted. The servants had left them to their coffee. Irene came round and sat down close to her husband. "You know something, something you didn't mean me to know. What is it, Frank?"

Bowdon looked at her steadily. He had meant to tell nothing; but he had already told too much. A sudden gleam of understanding came into her eyes; her quick intuition discerned a connection between this thing and the other incident which had puzzled her.

"I believe it's something to do with that cheque Ashley Mead sent you," she said. She would not move her eyes from his face.

"I'm not at liberty to tell you anything about it. Of course I'm not going to deny that there's a secret. But I can't tell you about it, Irene."

"You would be quite safe in telling me." She rose and stood looking down on him. "You ought to tell me," she said. "You ought to tell me anything that concerns both you and Ora Pinsent."

She was amazed to say this, and he to hear it. The one point of silence, of careful silence, the one thing which neither had dared to speak of to the other, the one hidden spring which had moved the conduct of both, suddenly became a matter of speech on her lips to him. Suddenly she faced the question and demanded that he also should face it. She admitted and she

claimed that what touched him and Ora Pinsent must touch her also. And he did not contest the claim.

"I must know, if — if we're to go on, Frank," she said.

"There's much less than you think," said he. "But I'll tell you. I tell you in confidence, you know. Fenning came. That's all."

Irene made no comment. That was not all; the cheque from Ashley Mead was not explained. Bowdon proceeded with his story. He told what he had to tell in short sharp sentences. "The fellow was impossible." "It was impossible to let her see him." "He was a rascal." "He drank." Pauses of silence were interspersed. "It would have killed her." "He only wanted money of her." "The idea of his going near her was intolerable." "She had forgotten what he was, or he had gone down-hill terribly."

"And the money?" asked Irene, in a low whisper. She had seated herself again, and was looking before her into the fireplace.

"He came for money; he had to have it if he was to go. Ashley asked me for it. I gave it him."

"As a loan? He sent it back."

"I didn't mean it as a loan. But, as you say, he's sent it back."

"Why?"

"Because he didn't want her to be indebted to me for it." His bitterness cropped out in his tone; he had desired a share in the work which Ashley would not give him. He must have forgotten his wife for the moment, or he would have kept that bitterness out of his voice; indeed for the moment he seemed to have forgotten her, as he leant his head on his hand and stared gloomily at the floor.

"So we gave him the money, and he went away again." She was silent. "You wouldn't wonder so much if you 'd seen him."

"I don't wonder," she said. "I haven't seen him, but I don't wonder. And you never told her?"

"No, I never told her."

"Nor Ashley Mead?"

"No, he 's never told her, either. And you mustn't." For an instant his tone was rigidly imperative.

In spite of the tone she seemed to pay no heed to the last words.

"You kept it all from her?" she asked again.

"Yes," he said. "Does that seem very wrong to you?"

"Oh, I don't know," she groaned.

"Or very strange?" he asked, turning his head and looking towards her.

She rose to her feet suddenly, walked to the mantelpiece, and stood there with her back towards him.

"No," she said, "not very strange. It 's only what I knew before. It 's not strange." She turned round and faced him; she was rather pale, but she smiled a little.

"I knew all the time that you were in love with her too," she said. "Of course you wouldn't let the man go near her!"

Bowdon raised his eyes to his wife's face. She turned away again.

"I knew it when I made you propose to me," she said.

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CHAPTER XX

THE WAYS DIVIDE

IT may safely be said that, had Bowdon's wife been such as Ora Pinsent, or Bowdon himself of the clay of which Ora was made, the foregoing conversation would not have stopped where it did, nor with the finality which in fact marked its close. It would have been lengthened, resumed, and elaborated; its dramatic possibilities in the way of tragedy and comedy (it was deficient in neither line) would have been developed; properly and artistically handled, it must have led to something. But ordinary folk, especially perhaps ordinary English folk, make of their lives one grand waste of dramatic possibilities, and as things fell out the talk seemed to lead to nothing. When Irene had made her remark about knowing that her husband was in love with Ora even when she induced him to propose to herself, she stood a moment longer by the mantel-piece and then went upstairs, as her custom was; he held the door open for her, as his custom was; sat down again, drank a small glass of cognac, and smoked a cigar, all as his custom was; in about half an hour he joined her in the drawing-room and they talked about the house they were going to take in Scotland for the autumn. Neither then nor in the days that followed was any reference made to this after-dinner conversation, nor to the startling way in which the hidden had

become open, the veil been for a moment lifted, and the thing which was between them declared and recognised. The dramatic possibilities were, in fact, absolutely neglected and thrown away; to all appearance the conversation might never have taken place, so little effect did it seem to have, so absolutely devoid of result it seemed to be. It was merely that for ever there it was, never to be forgotten, always to form part of their consciousness, to define permanently the origin of their relations to one another, to make it quite plain how it was that they came to be passing their lives together. That it did all these not unimportant things and yet never led to another acute situation or striking scene shews how completely the dramatic possibilities were thrown away.

It did not even alter Irene's resolve of going to see Ora Pinsent. To acquiesce in existing facts appeared the only thing left to do so far as she herself was concerned: but the facts might still be modified for others; this was what she told herself. Besides this feeling, she was impelled by an increased curiosity, a new desire to see again and to study the woman who had been the occasion of this conversation, who had united her husband and her friend in a plot and made them both sacrifice more than money because they would not have Jack Fenning come near her. We are curious when we are jealous; where lies the power, what is the secret of the strength which conquers us?

The scene in the little house at Chelsea was very much the same as Alice Muddock had once chanced on there. Sidney Hazlewood and Babba Flint were with Ora; after a swift embrace Ora resumed her talk with them. The talk was of tours, triumphs, and thousands; the masterpiece was finished; it bulged nobly in Babba's pocket, type-written, in brown covers, with

pink ribbons to set off its virgin beauty. On the table lay a large foolscap sheet, fairly written; this was an agreement, ready for Ora's signature; when it had received that, it would be, as Hazlewood was reminding Ora, an agreement. Ora was struck anew with the unexpectedness of this result of merely writing one's name, and shewed a disinclination to take the decisive step. She preferred to consider tour, triumphs, and thousands as hypothetical delights; she got nearly as much enjoyment out of them and was bound to nothing. Babba smoked cigarettes with restless frequency and nervous haste; a horse and cart could almost have been driven along the wrinkle on Mr. Hazlewood's brow. He looked sixty, if he looked a day, that afternoon. Irene sat unnoticed, undisturbed, with the expression in her eyes which a woman wears when she is saying, "Yes, I suppose it would be so; I suppose men would. I don't feel it myself, but I understand how it would be." The expression is neither of liking nor of dislike; it is of unwilling acquiescence in a fact recognised but imperfectly comprehended. The presence of the power is admitted, the source but half discovered; the analysis of a drug need not be complete before we are able to discern its action.

"I won't sign to-day," said Ora. "I might change my mind."

"Good Lord, don't!" cried Babba, seizing another cigarette.

"That's just why we want you to sign to-day," said Hazlewood, passing his hand over his forehead in a vain effort to obliterate the wrinkle.

"Then you'd bring an action against me!" exclaimed Ora indignantly.

"Without a doubt — and win it," said Hazlewood.

"I hate agreements. I hate being committed to things. Oh, do give me a cigarette!"

After all, was it not strange that both the men should have done what they had for her? Was there not a touch of vulgarity in her? To the jealous eyes of a woman, perhaps. "But men don't see that," thought Irene Bowdon as she sat on the sofa; she was in that favourite seat of her hostess', by the little table, the portrait in its silver frame, and the flower-vase that once had hidden the letter from Bridgeport, Connecticut.

There was more in Ora's mood than her natural indecision, or her congenital dislike of being bound, or her ingrained dread of agreements which were agreements. The men did not see this; what do men see? But the observant woman on the sofa saw it. The power of the tour, the triumphs, and the thousands was fought by another power; the battle raged in the heart of the woman who would not sign, who chaffed and laughed and protested petulantly, who put off her persuaders by any art or device her beauty excused or her waywardness furnished, who would say neither yes nor no. The conflict declared itself in her nervous laughs, in her ridiculous puffings at an ill-used cigarette, in the air of attention which seemed to expect or hope for a new arrival, perhaps somebody to rescue her, to decide for her, to take the burden of choice from the shoulders that she shrugged so deprecatingly.

"It's awful to go wandering about over there for months," she said. "I hate you both, oh, how I hate you both!"

"The part —" began Babba.

"Do be quiet. I know it's a lovely part," cried Ora. Then she turned suddenly to Irene and began to laugh. "Don't tell anybody how silly I am, Irene,"

she said, and she looked at the clock again with that expectant hopeful air.

"It's now or never," declared Mr. Hazlewood, with much solemnity.

"Oh, nonsense!" said Ora peevishly. "It's now or to-morrow; and to-morrow will do just as well."

Hazlewood and Babba exchanged glances. After all, to-morrow would be just in time; they had wrestled long with her to-day.

"If you'll take your Bible oath to settle one way or the other to-morrow—" Babba began.

"I will, I will, oh, of course I will," Ora interrupted, infinite joy and relief lighting up her face. "I shall know quite well by to-morrow. Do go now, there's good men. I'll settle it all in five minutes to-morrow."

"Mind you do," said Babba, looking round for his hat. Hazlewood had his and was staring at the crown of it; a coach and four might have hazarded passage along the wrinkle now.

"You'll be just the same to-morrow," he observed, hardly reproachfully, but with an air of sad knowledge.

"I shan't," said Ora indignantly. "If you think that of me, I wonder you have anything to do with me. Oh, but I suppose I'm useful! Nobody cares for me—only just for the use I am to them!"

Both men smiled broadly; greatly to her surprise and disgust Irene found herself exchanging what she was obliged to call a grin with Babba Flint; she had not expected to live to do that.

"That's just it, Miss Pinsent," said Babba. "You ain't clever, and you ain't pleasant, and you ain't pretty; but the fool of a public happens to like you, so we've all got to pretend you are; and we mean to work you to the last tanner, don't you know?"

Mr. Hazlewood smiled sardonically; he did not admire Babba's wit.

"This time to-morrow then," said Ora, ringing the bell. "Oh, and take your agreement with you; I won't have the odious thing here." She flung it at Babba, who caught it cleverly. "I couldn't live in the room with it," she said.

Ora waited till she heard the house door shut upon her visitors. "Thank goodness!" she cried then, as she sank into a chair opposite Irene. "How good of you to come and see me," she went on.

Irene was hard on her search; she did not allow herself to be turned aside by mere civilities, however charming might be the cordiality with which they were uttered.

"Are you really going to America?" she asked.

Ora's face grew plaintive again; she thought that she had got rid of that question till the next day.

"Oh, I suppose so. Yes. I don't know, I'm sure." She leant forward towards her friend. "I suppose you're awfully happy, aren't you, Irene?"

Irene smiled; she had no intention of casting doubts on her bliss in her present company.

"Then do be kind to me, because I'm awfully miserable. Now you're looking as if you were going to tell me it was my own fault. Please don't, dear. That doesn't do any good at all."

"Not the least I'm sure, to you," said Irene Bowdon.

Ora scanned her friend's face anxiously and timidly. She was speculating on the amount of sympathy to be expected; she knew that on occasion Irene could be almost as unjust as Alice Muddock. She was afraid that Irene would break out on her. Irene was in no such mood; coldly, critically, jealously observant, she

waited for this woman to throw new lights on herself, to exhibit the kind of creature she was, to betray her weakness and to explain her power.

"Can't you make up your mind whether to go or not?" she asked with a smile.

"If you only knew what going means to me!" cried Ora. Suddenly she rose and flung herself on her knees beside her friend. Irene had an impulse to push her away; but she sat quite still and suffered Ora to take her hand. "You see, he can't come with me," Ora went on, with a pathetic air which seemed to bemoan the wanton impossibility of what might, had it been so disposed, have been quite possible.

"Who can't go with you? Mr. Mead?"

"Yes, Ashley; who else could I mean?"

"Well, I don't suppose he can." Irene gave a short laugh.

"No," said Ora resentfully. "He can't, you see." She looked up in Irene's face. "At least I suppose he can't?" she said in a coaxing voice; then dreariness conquered and reigned in her whole air as she added mournfully, "Anyhow, I 'm sure he won't."

"I hope to goodness he won't," said Irene Bowdon.

Ora drew a little away, as though surprised; then she nodded and smiled faintly.

"I knew you 'd say that," she remarked.

"What in the world else should I say?" Irene demanded.

"Nothing, I suppose," sighed Ora. "It would be quite out of the question, wouldn't it?"

"Quite," said Irene, and shut her lips close as the one word left them. Her patience was failing. There were two possible things, to be respectable, and not to be respectable; but there was no such third course as Ora seemed to expect to have found for her.

"Of course if I give up the tour," said Ora, in a meditative tone, "things could go on as they are."

"Could they?" cried Irene. "Oh, I don't know how they are, and I don't want to ask. Well, then, I suppose I don't believe the worst or I shouldn't be here; but almost everybody does, and if you go on much longer quite everybody will."

"I don't mind a bit about that," remarked Ora. Her tone was simple and matter-of-fact; she was neither making a confession nor claiming a merit. "How can I be expected to? I lost all feeling of that sort when Jack didn't come. He was the person who ought to have cared, and he didn't care enough to come when I said he might."

The reference to Mr. Fenning touched Irene's wound, and it smarted again. But she was loyal to her husband's injunction and gave no hint which might disturb Ora's certainty that Jack Fenning had not come.

"I think you'd better go away before you've quite ruined Ashley Mead's life," she said in cold and deliberate tones; "and before you've ruined yourself too, if you care about that."

She expected to be met by one of Ora's old pitiful protests against harsh and unsympathetic judgments; the look in Ora's eyes a little while ago had foreshadowed such an appeal. But it did not come now. Ora regarded her with a faint smile and brows slightly raised.

"I don't see," she said, "how all sorts of different people can be expected all to behave in exactly the same way."

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Irene irritably.

"Well, that's what it comes to, if you listen to what people say."

"Do you mean if you listen to what I say?"

"Yes," said Ora, with a smile, "you and Miss Muddock and all the rest of them. And I suppose you've made Lord Bowdon as bad by now? I'm not going to think about it any more." She shook her head as though to clear away these mists of conventional propriety. "If people can be happy anyhow, why shouldn't they?" she added.

"I believe," said Irene, "that you really think you're coming to a new resolution. As if you'd ever thought of anything except what you liked!"

Ora shook her head again, this time in gentle denial; memories of infinite sacrifices to the Ideal rose before her; for example, there was the recalling of her husband. But she would not argue as to her own merits; she had ceased to expect justice or to hope for approbation.

"It's all no use," she said despondently. "I may say what I like, but he won't come." Again she spoke as though she would not give up the tour and would sign the agreement on the morrow, and would do this although she knew that Ashley would not come. Then they would separate! To her own sheer amazement and downright shame Irene Bowdon felt a sharp pang of sorrow; for Ora looked puzzled and forlorn, as though she did what she could not help and suffered keenly at the price she had to pay. Their eyes met, and Ora divined the newly born sympathy. "You are sorry for me, aren't you?" she murmured, stretching her hands out towards her friend.

"Yes," said Irene, with a laugh. "I actually am." She was beginning to understand the transaction which had sent Jack Fenning away richer by a thousand pounds.

"I know you 'd help me if you could," Ora went on, "but nobody can; that 's the worst of it." She paused for a moment, and then remarked with a mournful smile, "And suppose Babba 's wrong and the play does no good after all!"

Irene's warmth of feeling was chilled; she did not understand the glamour of the play so well as she appreciated the pathos of the parting. The strength of the tie came home to her, the power which fought against it was beyond her experience or imagination.

"I wonder you can think about the play at all," she said.

"Oh, you 've no idea what a part it is for me!" cried Ora. But her plea sounded weak, even flippant, to Irene; she condemned it as the fruit of vanity and the sign of shallowness. Ora caused in others changes of mood almost as quick as those she herself suffered.

"Well, if you go because you like the part, you can't expect me to be very sorry for you. It 's a very good thing you should go; and your part will console you for — for what you leave behind."

Ora made no answer; her look of indecision and puzzle had returned; it was useless to try to make another understand what she herself failed to analyse. But as the business drew Alice Muddock, so the play drew her; and the business had helped to turn Alice's heart from Ashley Mead. He had not been able there to conquer what was in the blood and mingled its roots with the roots of life. No thought of a parallel came to Irene Bowdon; any point of likeness between the two women or their circumstances would have seemed to her impossible and the idea of it absurd; they were wide asunder as the poles. What she did dimly feel was the fashion in which Ashley seemed to stand midway

between them, within hearing of both and yet divided from each; she approached the conclusion that he was not really made for either, because he had points which likened him to both. But this was little more than a passing gleam of insight; she fell back on the simpler notion that after all Ashley and Ora could not be so very much in love with one another. If they were victims of the desperate passion she had supposed, one or other or both would give up everything else in the world. They were both shallow then; and probably they would do nothing very outrageous. Relief, disappointment, almost scorn, mingled together in her as she arrived at this conclusion.

"I 'm sure you and Mr. Mead will end by being sensible," she said to Ora, with a smile which was less friendly than she wished it to appear. "You 've been very foolish, but you both seem to see that it can't go on." She leant forward and looked keenly at Ora.

"Well?" said Ora, put on her defence by this scrutiny.

"Do you really care much about him? I wonder if you could really care much about anybody!" She was rather surprised to find herself speaking so openly about an attachment which her traditions taught her should be sternly ignored; but she was there to learn what the woman was like.

"I don't love people often, but I love Ashley," was Ora's answer; it was given with her own blend of intensity and innocence. To Irene Bowdon, even armoured as she was in prejudice, it carried conviction. "It 'll almost kill me to go away from him."

"You 'll forget all about him."

"Should I be any happier if I believed that? Should you be happier for thinking that you 'd stop loving your husband?"

"If I had to lose him —" Irene began.

"No, no, no," insisted Ora; her eyes were full of tears. "Oh, you don't understand, how can you understand? I suppose you think it's Jack? I tell you it would be the same if Jack had never existed. No, I don't know. But anyhow it would be the same if he didn't exist now." She began to walk about the room, her hands clasped tight on one another.

As she spoke the door opened and Ashley came in. Irene started, but did not move: she had not wished to see them together; the sight of their meeting revived her disapprobation; the thing, being made palpable, became again offensive to her. But escape was impossible. Ora seemed entirely forgetful of the presence of any onlooker; she ran straight to Ashley, crying his name, and caught him by both his hands. He looked across at Irene, then raised Ora's hands in his and kissed each of them. He seemed tired.

"I'm late," he said. "I've had a busy day." He released Ora and came towards Irene. "They've actually taken to sending me briefs! How are you, Lady Bowdon?"

"And the briefs keep him from me," said Ora; she was standing now in the middle of the room.

"Yes," he said with a smile at her. "The world's a very selfish thing; it wants a big share." He paused a moment, and went on, "I smell much tobacco; who's been here?"

"Sidney Hazlewood and Babba," Ora answered. "They came about the play. They want me to sign the agreement to-morrow."

"Ah, yes," he said wearily. "They're very persistent gentlemen. Your husband all right, Lady Bowdon?"

"Quite, thanks." Irene rose. She had a desire to get away. She did not follow the lines of the play nor understand the point of the tragedy; but the sight of them together made her sure that there was a tragedy, and she did not wish to see it played. In the first place, that there should be a tragedy was all wrong, and her presence must not sanction it; in the second place, the tragedy looked as if it might be intolerably distressing and must be utterly hopeless. They would find no way out; his weariness declared that as plainly as the helplessness of Ora's puzzled distress. Irene decided to go home; she would be better there; for although she had her own little tragedy, she could keep it safely under lock and key. The secret purpose of her visit stood accomplished; if she had realised Ora in distress, she would have sorrowed to send Jack Fenning back to her. The difference between doing it with sorrow and refusing to do it altogether was no greater than might be expected between a woman and men in such a case. To have got thus far without having seen Mr. Fenning must stand for an achievement to Lady Bowdon's credit.

Ora let her go without resistance. At the last Irene was full of friendly feeling, but of feeling that here was the end of a friendship. By one way or another Ora was drifting from her; they would not see much more of one another. Perhaps it had never been natural that they should see much of one another; atoms from different worlds, they had met fortuitously; the chance union yielded now before the dissolving force of their permanent connexions. But even such meetings leave results, and Ora, passing out of her friend's life as a presence, would not be forgotten; she left behind her the effect that she had had, the difference that she had made. She could never be forgotten; she would only

be unmentioned and ignored; there must be many minutes in which Irene would think of her and know that she was in Bowdon's thoughts also. The way of things seemed to be that people should come into one's life, do something to it, and then go away again; the coming was not their fault, what they did seemed hardly their own doing. She was no longer angry with Ora; she was sorry for Ora, and she was sorry for herself. Was there not some wantonness somewhere? Else why had Ora's raid on her little treasure-house come about? It had done harm to her, and no good to Ora. But she kissed Ora with fondness as she left her.

"I'm glad to find you here," said Ashley, as he escorted her downstairs. "It shews you don't believe the gossip about her — about her and me."

Irene turned to him, but made no comment.

"Oh, I don't know that there 's any particular credit to anybody in the gossip not being true; still as a fact it isn't true. She hasn't got you here on false pretences."

Irene seemed now not to care whether the gossip were true or not. She did not get into her carriage, but detained Ashley on the doorstep.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Haven't you talked about it to Ora?" he enquired.

"Yes, but Ora doesn't know what to do." She was possessed with a longing to tell him that she knew about Jack Fenning, but her loyalty to Bowdon still restrained her.

Ashley looked at her; his face struck her again as being very tired and fretted, but it wore his old friendly smile; he seemed to take her into his confidence and to appeal to a common knowledge as he answered her.

"Oh, you know, she'll go to America," he said. "It'll end in that."

"Does she want to go?" asked Irene.

His eyes dwelt steadily on hers and he nodded his head. "Yes, she wants to go," he said, smiling still. "She doesn't know it, poor dear, but she wants to go."

"She'd stop if you told her!" exclaimed Irene impulsively. How came she to make such a suggestion? She spent half the evening trying to discover.

"Yes, that's so too," he said.

"And — and of course you can't go with her?"

"I shan't go with her," said Ashley. "I can't, if you like to put it that way."

She pressed him; her curiosity would not be satisfied.

"You don't want to go?" she asked.

His answer was very slow in coming this time, but he faced the question at last.

"No," he said, "I don't want to go." He paused, glanced at her again, and again smiled. "So, you see, we shall both have what we really like, and there's no reason to pity us, is there, Lady Bowdon?"

Then she got into her carriage, and, as she shook hands with him, she said,

"Well, I don't know that you're worse off than a good many other people."

"I don't know that we are," said Ashley.

And, as she went home, she added that they had themselves to thank for their troubles, whereas the greater part of hers could not fairly be laid at her own door. "If that makes it any better, you know," she murmured, half aloud.

But perhaps one minded to deal with her as faithfully as she thought that Ora should be dealt with, might have observed that not to become Lady Bowdon had once been a thing in her power.

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"THE CONTRACT PUNCTILIOUSLY SIGNED BY ALL THE PARTIES, AND WITNESSED BY JANET THE MAID."—*Page* 301.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

THE bargain was struck, the agreement made, the contract punctiliously signed by all the parties, and witnessed by Janet the maid. There were two copies; Mr. Hazlewood had one, Ora the other; Babba possessed himself of a memorandum. They had opened a bottle of champagne and drunk success to the enterprise; prospective triumphs, thousands, fame, bubbled out into the glasses. Babba was wildly hilarious, and vulgar with a profusion of debased phrases beyond even his wont. Mr. Hazlewood smoothed his brow provisionally; he knew that it must wrinkle again many times ere the tour was done and the thousands pocketed. Ora talked very fast, smoked two cigarettes, and darted to and fro about the room, restless as quicksilver, utterly refusing to take her seat on the sofa. The arrangements suspended during her days of indecision could now swiftly be put in working order; men waited for the word at the end of cables and telephones across the Atlantic. The announcements needed only the final touches of Babba's practised pen; the berths on the boat would be booked before to-morrow's sun rose. The thing was settled; beyond all other agreements, this agreement was an agreement; beyond all other undertakings, this undertaking bound them all. For they were launched on a great venture and none could now draw back. It had

ended in Ora's consenting to go, as Ashley Mead had said it would.

Babba Flint and Sidney Hazlewood were gone; Janet, who also had drunk a glass of champagne, had withdrawn below again; it was very quiet in the drawing-room of the little house in Chelsea. Ora was in her seat now, by the small table, the portrait, and the vase of fresh roses which from day to day were never wanting. She lay back there, looking at the ceiling with wide-opened eyes; she did not move except when her fingers plucked fretfully at a trimming of lace on her gown; she was thinking what she had done, what it came to, what it would end in. She remembered her uncomfortable talk with Ashley the day before, after Irene had gone, when he would not say "Sign," nor yet, "For God's sake, darling, don't sign, don't go, don't leave me;" but would only smile and say, "You want to go, don't you, Ora?" She had been able to say neither, "Yes, I want to go," nor yet, "For all the world I wouldn't leave you;" but had been perverse and peevish, and at last had sent him away with a petulant dismissal. But all the time they both had known that she would sign and that she would go, because things were setting irresistibly in that direction and it was impossible to say No to fate. Fate does not take denials; its invitations are courteously but persistently renewed. So now she had signed and she was going.

Of course it meant much more than appeared on the surface; she had felt that even at the moment, in spite of Babba's jokes and Hazlewood's business-like attitude. When she was left alone, the feeling came on her in tenfold strength; the drama of her action started to light, its suppressed meaning became manifest, all its effects unrolled themselves before her. Yet how shortly all

could be put; she was going away from Ashley Mead; the sweet companionship was to be broken. Did such things come twice, could threads so dropped ever be picked up again? But all this happened by her own act. She faced the charge with a denial that there was more than the most superficial of truths in it. She had not been able to help her action; it was hers in a sense, no doubt, but it was the action of a self over which not she as she knew herself, but this mysterious irresistible bent of things, held control. And the control was very tyrannous. Ashley was bound too; for in all the uncomfortable talk there had been never a suggestion that he should come with her; for both of them that had become an impossibility not to be taken into account. As things would have it, he could not go and she could not stay. There assailed her such a storm of fear and horror as had beset her once before, when her fine scheme of renunciation and reformation was shattered by the little hard fact that the train drew near to the station and in ten minutes Ashley would be gone and Jack Fenning come. She caught Ashley's picture and kissed it passionately; then she laid her head down on the cushions and began to sob. She knew now what she had done; she had driven Ashley out of her life, and life without him was not worth having. How had she been so mad as to sign, to deliver herself bound hand and foot to these men who only wanted to make money out of her, to think that any triumph could console her for the loss of her love? Was it too late, would not a telegram undo all that had been done? She sat up with a sudden abrupt movement; should she write one? They might send her to prison, she supposed, or anyhow make her pay a lot of money. They would think she used them very badly. Oh, what

was all that? They could get somebody else to play her part —

Why, so they could! Anybody would be glad to play that part; it might bring new treasure of glory to the great — sweet strange fame to one yet unknown. Ora's sobs were for a moment stayed; she sat looking straight in front of her.

Ah, how hard things were! How they harassed, how they tortured, how they tore one asunder! She lay back and sobbed again, now not so passionately, but more gently, yet despairingly. So tragic a guise may sometimes be assumed by such homely truths as that you cannot blow both hot and cold, that you can't eat your cake and have it, and that you must in the end decide whether you will go out by the door or by the window.

She had told Ashley to come to her again that day to hear her decision. It was the appointed hour, and she began to listen for his tread with fear. For he would think that she did not love him, and she did love him; he would say that she wanted to go, and she loathed going; he would tell her all her going meant, and she knew all it meant. It would be between them as it had been yesterday, and worse. Alas, that she should have to fear the sound of Ashley's foot! Ah, that she could throw herself into his arms, saying, "Ashley, I won't go!" Then the sweet companionship and days in the country could come again, all could be forgotten in joy, and the existence of to-morrow be blotted out.

And Mr. Hazlewood and Babba would get somebody else to play the part — the great, great part.

There was the tread. She heard and knew it, and sat up to listen to it, her lips parted and her eyes wide; marked it till it reached the very door, but did

not rise to meet it. She would sit there and listen to all that he said to her.

He came in smiling; that seemed strange; he walked up to her and greeted her cheerily; she glanced at him in frightened questioning.

"So you 've arranged it?" he said, sitting down opposite to her.

"How do you know, Ashley?"

"Oh, I should know, anyhow," he answered, laughing; "but I met Babba singing a song in Piccadilly — rather loud it sounded — and he stopped to tell me."

"Oh," she murmured nervously. That he had come to know in this way seemed an anti-climax, a note which jarred the tragic harmony; she would have told him in a tempest of tears and self-reproach.

"You 've done quite right," he went on. "It wasn't a chance to miss. I should have been a selfish brute if I 'd wanted you to give it up. Besides —" He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Come, Ora," he went on, "don't look so sorrowful about it."

He was not as he had been the day before; the touch of mockery which she had seemed to see then was quite gone. He took her hand and caressed it gently.

"Poor dear," he said, "making up your mind always upsets you so terribly, doesn't it?"

"It 's going away from you," she whispered, and her grasp fixed tightly on his hand.

"For a few months," he said.

"Don't you think that long?" she cried, her eyes growing reproachful; she had made up her mind that it was eternity.

"I don't mean to think it long, and you mustn't think it long," he said. "The time 'll go like lightning. Get an almanac and ink out the days, as homesick

boys do at school; it's quite consoling. And you 'll have so much to do, so much to fill your thoughts."

"And you?"

"Oh, I shall jog along till you come back. I shall be there to meet you then. We 'll come up to town together."

Was this really all? Was there no great, no final tragedy, after all? So it might seem from his quiet cheerful manner. Ora was bewildered, in a way disappointed, almost inclined to be resentful.

"It looks as if you didn't care so very much," she murmured; she tried to draw her hand away from his, but he held it fast. He shut his lips close for a moment, and then said, still very quietly,

"You mustn't think it means that, dear." On the last word his voice quivered, but he went on again. "It means a very long night; the sun won't rise again for ever so many months. But some day it will." She had turned her head away, and, as he made this confident declaration, a smile bent his lips for a moment, a smile not of amusement.

"Will it?" she asked, leaning towards him again, praying him to repeat his comforting words.

"Of course it will."

"And you won't forget me? Ashley, don't forget me!"

"Not likely, my dear," said he. "I think Miss Pinsent makes herself remembered."

"Because I shan't forget you, not for a moment," she said, fixing her eyes on his. "Oh, it 's hard to leave you!"

She took up her handkerchief from the small table and dried her eyes. "Your picture will go with me everywhere," she said, lightly touching it. "But I shan't be

able to have your roses, shall I? Would you like some tea, Ashley?"

"Very much indeed," said he.

After all, why not tea? There is nothing in tea necessarily inconsistent with tragedy; still her vague forecasts of this conversation had not included the taking of tea.

"Now show me your agreement," he said. "I must see that they've not done you."

As they had tea, they looked through the contract, clause by clause. On the whole Ashley was very well satisfied, although he suggested that one or two points might be modified in Ora's favour; she quite grasped what he put forward and thought that she would be able to obtain the concessions from her partners.

"I ought to make all I can, oughtn't I?" she asked. "I'm giving up so much to go."

"You ought to be as greedy as you possibly can," he assured her with a laugh. He wanted to prevent her from beginning to talk again of what she was giving up; what she would gain was a better topic; just as she must not think how long she would be away, but on the other hand how soon she would be back. We cannot control facts, but there is a limited choice of aspects in which we may regard them and present them for the consideration of our friends. In this little free field optimism and pessimism are allowed to play.

"You can always make me happy!" she sighed, leaning back.

"I know the way to do it, you see," he answered. He had decided that in this case the best way to do it was to let her go and play her part.

"Even when you're gone, I shan't be as miserable as I was before. You've made it all seem less — less

big and less awful, you know. Every day will really be bringing me nearer to you again; even the first day! It 'll begin directly, won't it? Oh, I shall cry, but now I shall be able to think of that too."

He was not deceiving her in anything like the grave manner in which he had deceived her concerning Jack Fenning, but he felt something of the same qualms. He did not yield an inch to them externally; he had made up his mind to cheat her into going happily; when once that was done, he thought she would soon grow happy; and if it were to be done, it should be done thoroughly. A few tears were inevitable, but they must be alleviated with smiles of hope.

"Directly you go away, you 'll begin coming back, won't you? Really I almost wish you were gone already, Ora!"

She laughed at this whimsical idea, but agreed that the actual going would be the one irremediably black spot. Then she grew grave suddenly, as though an unwelcome thought had flashed into her mind.

"Ashley," she said, "suppose I — I meet Jack! He 's over there, you know. What shall I do?"

"Oh, he won't bother you, I expect," Ashley assured her.

"But if he does? I shan't have you to take care of me, you know."

"If he does, you go straight to Hazlewood. He 's a good fellow and knows his way about the world. He 'll see you come to no harm and aren't victimised."

"Will he keep Jack away from me?"

"Yes, I think so. Take him into your confidence." Ashley smiled for a moment. "He 'll know the sort of man Fenning is."

Ora seemed a good deal comforted.

"Yes, I like Sidney Hazlewood," she said. "He's awfully tiresome sometimes, but you feel that you can rely on him. He gives you an idea of strength, as if you could put yourself in his hands. Oh, but not so much as you do, of course! But then you won't be there."

"He'll look after you just as well as I should."

"Perhaps he will, as far as the actual thing goes," she admitted. Then she began to smile. "But — but I shan't like it so much from him."

"You never know that till you try," said Ashley, answering her smile with a cheerful smile.

"Oh, that's absurd," said Ora. "But I do think he'll stand by me." She leant forward and put her hand on his knee. "If I were in very, very great trouble and sent for you, would you come?"

"Yes," said Ashley, "I'd come then."

"Whatever you had to do? Whatever time it took? However far off I was?"

"Yes," he answered. "Anyhow I'd come. But you won't — " He hesitated for a moment. "You won't have any cause to send for me," he ended.

"Oh, but I should rather like one," she whispered, almost merrily.

He shook his head. "I shall come only if you're in very, very great trouble; otherwise you must depend on Hazlewood. But you won't be in trouble, and I don't think you'll have any bother about Fenning." For would not Mr. Fenning have the best of reasons for avoiding observation while Hazlewood was about? To Hazlewood he was Foster, and Miss Macpherson, by the dictates of politeness, Mrs. Foster.

It was in entire accord with the line of conduct which Ashley had laid down for himself that even now he said

no more of Jack Fenning, and nothing of what he had done about him or heard about him. He stood aside; he had determined not to take her life into his hands; he could not put his into hers; he would not, then, seek to shape events either for her or for himself; he would give her no information and urge on her no course. If she came across her husband, something would very likely happen; or again it was quite probable that nothing would occur except an unpleasant interview and the transference of some of Ora's earnings to Jack's pocket. Miss Macpherson might appear or she might not. Ashley had gone as far as he meant to go when he told Ora to look to Mr. Hazlewood if she were in any trouble. And if she should chance to want, or assent to, "nosings" being carried on, why, was not Babba Flint to be of the party? He dismissed all this from his mind, so far as he could. It was not part of Ora, but yet it hung about Ora; he hated it all because it hung about her, and would intrude sometimes into his thoughts of her. Why had such sordid things ever come near her? But they had, and they, as well as the play and the part, were a fence between her and him. The bitterness of this conclusion was nothing new; he had endured it before; he endured it again as he talked to her and coaxed her into going happily.

But amid all the complexities of reasons, of feelings, and of choices in which men live, there are moments when simplicity reasserts itself, and one thing swallows all others; joy or sorrow brings them. Then the meeting is everything; or again, there is nothing save the parting, and it matters nothing why we must part, or should part, or are parting. Not to be together overwhelms all the causes which forbid us to be together; the pain seems almost physical; people cannot sit still

when it is on them any more than when they have a toothache. Such a moment was not to be altogether evaded by any clever cheating of Ora into going happily. There were the inevitable tears from her; in him there was the fierce impulse after all to hold her, not to let her go, to do all that he was set not to do, by any and every means to keep her in hearing and sight and touch. For when she was gone what were touch and hearing and sight to do? They would all be useless and he, their owner, useless too. But of this in him she must see only so much as would assure her of his love and yet leave her to go happy. That she should go happy and still not doubt his love was the object at which he had to aim; the cost was present emptiness of his own life. But things have to be paid for, whether we are furnishing our own needs or making presents to our friends; the ultimate destination of the goods does not change a farthing in the bill.

His last hour with her seemed to set itself, whether in indulgence or in irony he could not decide, to focus and sum up all that she had been to him, to shew all the moods he knew, the ways he loved, the changes that he had traced with so many smiles. She wept, she laughed, she hummed a tune; she took offence and offered it; she flirted and she prayed for love; she held him at arm's length, only to fall an instant later into his arms; she said she should never see him again, and then decided at what restaurant they would dine together on the evening of reunion; she waxed enthusiastic about the part, and then cried that all parts were the same to her since he would not be in the theatre. To be never the same was to be most herself. Yet out of all this variety, in spite of her relapses into tragedy, the clear conclusion formed itself in his mind that she

was going happy, at least excited, interested, eager, and not frightened nor utterly desolate. Yet at the last she hung about him as though she could not go; and at the last — he had prayed that this might be avoided — there came back into her eyes the puzzled, alarmed, doubtful look, and with it the reproach which seemed to ask him what he was doing with her, to say that after all it was his act, that he was master, and that when she gave herself into his hands no profession of abdication could free him from his responsibility. If it were so, the burden must be borne; the delusion under which she went must not be impaired.

The last scene came on a misty morning at Waterloo Station; it had been decided that he should part from her there, should hand her over to the men who wanted to make money out of her, and so go his ways. The place was full of people; Babba chattered volubly in the intervals of rushing hither and thither after luggage, porters, friends, provisions, playing-cards, remembering all the things he had forgotten, finding that he had forgotten all that he meant to remember. Hazlewood, a seasoned traveller, smoked a cigar and read the morning paper, waiting patiently till his man should put him in the reserved corner of his reserved carriage; certainly he looked a calm man to whom one might trust in a crisis. Ora and Ashley got a few minutes together in the booking-office, while her maid looked to her trunks and Babba flew to buy her flowers. Nobody came near them. Then it was that it seemed as though the success of his pretence failed in some degree, as though she also felt something of the sense which pressed so remorselessly on him, the sense of an end, that thus they were now together, alone, all in all to one another, and that thus they would never be again.

The tears ran down Ora's cheeks; she held both his wrists in her hands with the old grip that said, "You mustn't go." She could not speak to him, he found nothing to say to her; but her tears cried to him, "Are you right?" Their reproach was bitter indeed, their appeal might seem irresistible. What now beside them were parts and plays, lives and their lines, Hazlewoods, Babba Flints, aye, or Jack Fennings either? They pleaded for the parlour in the little inn, reminding him how there first she had thrown herself on his mercy, asking him whether now for the first time he meant in very truth to turn cruel and abuse the trust.

But days had passed, and months, since then; with love had come knowledge, and the knowledge had to be reckoned with, although it had not destroyed the love. Was that ungentle? The knowledge was of himself as well as of her; he dealt no blow that he did not suffer. The knowledge was, above all, of the way things were and must be. Therefore in all the stress of parting he could not, desire it as he might, doubt that he was right.

Hazlewood raised his voice and called from the platform, "Off in five minutes, Mead! Hadn't you better take Miss Pinsent to her carriage?"

"Come, Ora," he said, "you must get in now."

For a moment longer she held his arms.

"I don't believe I shall ever see you again," she said. Then she dried her eyes and walked with him on to the platform. Here stood Babba, here Hazlewood, here all the retinue. Ashley led her up to Hazlewood. "Here she is," he said; he seemed to be handing her over, resigning charge of her. The three turned and walked together to the train.

"You'd rather go down just with your maid, I dare-

say," said Hazlewood. "It 's time to get in, you know." He held out his hand to Ashley and then walked away.

"Now, dear," said Ashley Mead.

She gave him her hand. For long he remembered that last grasp and the clinging reluctance with which it left him.

"Good-bye, Ashley," she said.

"You 're beginning to come back from this minute," he reminded her, forcing a smile. "As soon as ever the train moves you 're on your way home!"

"Yes," she smiled. "Yes, Ashley." But the charm of that conceit was gone; the tone was doubtful, sad, with only a forced recognition of how he meant to cheer her. Her eyes were more eloquent and more sincere, more outspoken too in their reproach. "You 're sending me away," they said.

So she went away, looking back out of the window so long as she could see him; not crying now, but with a curious, wistful, regretful, bewildered face, as though she did not yet know what he had done to her, what had happened, what change had befallen her. This was the last impression that he had of her as she went to encounter the world again without the aid to which he had let her grow so used, without the arm on which he had let her learn to lean.

But he seemed to know the meaning she sought for, to grasp the answer to the riddle that puzzled her. As he walked back through the empty town, back to the work that must be done and the day that must be lived through, it was all very clear to him, and seemed as inevitable as it was clear.

It was an end, that was what it was — an utter end.

For if it were anything but an end, he had done wrong. And he had no hope that he had done wrong.

The chilling sense that he knew only too well the truth and the right of it was on him; and because he had known them, he was now alone. Would not blindness then have been better?

"No, no; it's best to see," said he.

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CHAPTER XXII

OTHER WORLDS

ELISHA wore worthily the mantle of Elijah; nay, there were fresh vigour and a new genius in the management of Muddock and Mead. The turn-over grew, the percentage of working expenses decreased, the profits swelled; the branches were reorganised and made thoroughly up to the needs of the times; the big block in Buckingham Palace Road advanced steadily in prestige. For all this the small, compact, trim man with the keen pale-blue eyes had to be thanked. He had found a big place vacant; he did not hesitate to jump up to it, and behold, he filled it! Moreover he knew that he filled it; the time of promotion was over, the time of command was come. His quieter bearing and a self-possession which no longer betrayed incompleteness by self-assertion marked the change. He did not now tell people that he made sovereigns while they were making shillings. He could not give himself grace or charm, he could not help being still a little hard, rather too brusque and decisive in his ways; he could not help people guessing pretty accurately what he was and whence he came; but the rough edges were filed and the sharpest points rounded. Even Bowdon, who was for a number of reasons most prejudiced, admitted that it was no longer out of the question to ask him to dinner.

The business was to be turned into a company; this step was desirable on many grounds, among them because it pleased Miss Minna Soames. She was to marry Bob Muddock, now Sir Robert, and although she liked Bob and Bob's money she did not care much about Bob's shop. Neither did Bob himself; he did not want to work very hard, now that his father's hand was over him no more, and he thought that a directorship would both give him less to do and mitigate a relationship to the shop hitherto too close for his taste. So the thing was settled, and Bertie Jewett, as Managing Director, found himself in the position of a despot under forms of constitutional government. For Bob did as he was told; and given that a certain event took place, Bertie would control the larger part of the ordinary shares in virtue of his own holding, his brother-in-law's, and his wife's. Preference shares only had been offered to the public.

The event would take place. Nobody in the circle of the Muddocks' acquaintance doubted that now, although perhaps it might not occur very soon. For it was not the sort of thing which came with a rush; it depended on no sudden tempest of feeling, it grew gradually into inevitability. Union of interest, the necessity of constant meetings, the tendency to lean one on the other, work slowly, but when they have reached a certain point of advance their power is great. Bertie Jewett had not spoken of marriage yet and not for some time would he; but he had already entered the transaction on the credit side of his life's ledger. Alice knew that he had; she did not run away. Here was proof enough.

"It 's not the least use your saying you hope it won't happen. It will," Lady Bowdon remarked to her hus-

band; and he found it impossible to argue that she was wrong. For there was no force to oppose the force of habit, of familiarity, of what her family wanted, of what the quiet keen little man wanted and meant to have. Alice was not likely to fall into a sudden, new, romantic passion; her temper was not of the kind that produces such things. She had no other wooers; men felt themselves warned off. Was she then to live unmarried? This was a very possible end of the matter, but under the circumstances not the more likely. Then she would marry Bertie Jewett, unless the past could be undone and Ashley Mead come again into her heart. But neither was her temper of the sort that lets the past be undone; the registers of her mind were written in an ink which did not fade. Besides he had no thought of coming back to her.

But there was now, after Ora had gone off with her play and her part, a revival of friendship between them, started by a chance encounter at the Bowdons' and confirmed by a talk they had together when Ashley called in Kensington Palace Gardens. He was not insensible, and thought that she was not, to an element of rather wry comedy which had crept into their relations. He was sorry for himself, as he had very good grounds for being; he perceived that she was sorry for herself and, in view of the dominance and imminence of Bertie Jewett, fully acknowledged the soundness of her reasons. The comic side of the matter appeared when he recognised that, side by side with this self-commiseration, there existed in each of them an even stronger pity for the other, a pity that could not claim to be altogether free from contempt, since it was directed towards what each of them had chosen, as well as towards what had chanced to befall them from outside. They had

both been unfortunate, but there was no need to dwell on that; the more notable point was that whereas he had chosen to be of Ora Pinsent's party with all which that implied, she was choosing to be of Bertie Jewett's party with all which that implied. It was no slur on their own misfortunes that each would now refuse to take the other's place or to come over to the other's faction. The pity then which each had for the other was not merely for a state of circumstances accidental and susceptible of change, but for a habit of mind; they pitied one another as types even while they came again to like one another as individuals. For naturally they over-ran the mark of truth, he concluding that because she was drifting towards Bertie she was in all things like Bertie, she that because he had been carried off his feet by Ora Pinsent he was entirely such as Ora was. There was certainly something of the comic in this reciprocity of compassion; it made Ashley smile as he walked beside Alice in the garden.

"So Bob 's going to cut Buckingham Palace Road?" he asked.

"Hardly that. Oh, well, it 'll come to something like that. Minna has aristocratic instincts."

"I remember she had them about the theatre."

"She doesn't like the shop." Alice had been laughing, but grew grave now as she added, "Do you know, I get to like the shop more and more. I often go there and look on while they take stock or something of that kind. One 's in touch with a real life there, there 's something being done."

"I suppose there is," he admitted rather reluctantly. "I don't in the least object to other people doing it. However you said from the beginning that it wouldn't suit me."

"Yes, I know I did. I think so still." But whether her reasons were quite the same was more doubtful than ever. "But I'm quite sure it suits me admirably. I should like really to work at it."

"Sir James always relied on your opinion about it."

"I suppose he wasn't so wrong as he looked," she said with a little laugh. "It's in our blood, and I seem to have a larger share of it than Bob. Why should we try to get away from it? It's made us what we are."

"You didn't use to think that quite."

"No, and you didn't use to —"

"Be quite such a fool as I am? No, I don't think I did," said Ashley. "Still —"

"Still you can't conceive how I can interest myself so much in the business?"

"Something like that," he admitted. Her phrase went as near to candour as it was possible for them to go together. They walked on in silence for a little way, then Ashley smiled and remarked,

"I believe we get a lot of our opinions simply by disliking what we see of other people's; we select their opposites."

"Reaction?"

"Yes; and then we feed what we've picked up till it grows quite strong."

They fell into silence again. Friendliness could not banish the sense of distance between them; they could agree, more or less, as to how they had come to be so far apart, but the understanding brought them no nearer. Even agreeing to differ is still differing. Both were rather sad, yet both were smiling faintly, as they walked side by side; it was very absurd that they had ever thought of being so much to one another. Yet it was a rather sorrowful thing that in future they were to be

so very little to one another. Beneath their differences they had just enough of kinship to make them regret that the differences were so great, and so imperative in the conditions they imposed. A sudden impulse made Alice turn to him and say,

"I know you think I'm narrow; I hope you don't think I've been unkind or unfriendly. I did try to put myself in your place as well as I could; I never thought unkindly about you."

"How were you to put yourself in my place?" he asked, smiling at her. "I know you tried. But you'd have had to put yourself in somebody else's place as well."

"I suppose so," said Alice with a shake of her head; she certainly could not put herself in Ora Pinsent's place.

"After all, people are best in their own places," he went on. He paused for a moment, and added, "Supposing they can find out where their places are. You've found yours?"

"Yes," she answered. "Mine is the shop."

He sighed and smiled, lifting his hands. "I wonder where mine is," he said a moment later. For if his were not the shop, it had not seemed to be by Ora Pinsent either. "Perhaps I haven't got one," he went on. "And after all I don't know that I want one. Isn't it possible to keep moving about, trying one after another, you know?" He spoke lightly, making a jest of his question; but she had fallen into seriousness.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Work and labour truly to get mine own living. As for the rest, really I haven't thought about it."

She wanted to ask him whether he still loved Ora Pinsent, whether he were waiting for her to come back to him, and still made that the great thing in his life.

But she could find no words for these questions and no right in herself to ask them. The unuttered thoughts served only to check her sympathy for him; even if he did not look to Ora as the great thing in his future life, yet she had been so great in his past as to leave him not caring about the rest. "I'm hard at work, though," he said an instant after; it sounded as if he were seeking to defend himself.

Alice said something rather commonplace about the advantages of hard work; Ashley gave it the perfunctory assent it seemed to demand. Then came silence, and to both of them a sense that there was no more to be said between them.

In spite of this, perhaps because she would not acknowledge it, Alice asked him to dinner the next night, to meet the Bowdons and Bertie Jewett; he accepted with an odd sort of desire to make one of the family circle once again. His interest was mainly in Bertie; they sat on either side of Alice. Ashley's contempt for Bertie was now entirely for the type, and even there not very severe, for power of any kind extorts respect; it was in the main supplanted by the curiosity with which we look on people who are doing what we might have done had we so chosen, or been allowed by nature so to choose. There was a moment's pang when he perceived that Alice was more at ease and more comfortable in talking to Bertie; he was resigned to the change, but it was not very pleasant to look on at it in full operation. Irene, on his other side, allowed none of its significance to escape him; her glances pointed the moral; why she did this he could not understand, not tracing how part of her grudge against Ora attached to the man who had been so near and so much to Ora, and now recalled her so vividly to memory. Bowdon was polite

to Lady Muddock, but far from gay. Merriment, animation, sallies of wit or chaff, a certain amount of what a hostile critic might call noisiness, had become habitual to Ashley in the society which he had recently frequented; he found himself declaring this little party very dull, overdone with good sense and sobriety, wanting in irresponsibility of spirit. He hinted something of this feeling to Irene Bowdon.

"Oh, we don't go in for being brilliant," she said with a double touch of malice; she meant to hit at Ora and Ora's friends, and also perversely to include herself in his hinted depreciation of the company; this she liked to do because the depreciation came, as she knew, from a recollection of Ora and Ora's sort of society.

"Being brilliant isn't in itself a crime," pleaded Ashley; "even if it were, it's so rare that there's no need for an exemplary sentence."

"Why don't you talk to Alice?" she whispered.

"She prefers to talk to Mr. Jewett."

"I'm glad it annoys you."

"Are you? I'm rather surprised it does. I don't know why it should, you see."

Irene turned her shoulder on him with emphasised impatience. What right had he to find it dull? Did Bowdon also find it dull? Then came the worst irritation — the admission that it was dull. She turned back to Ashley with a sudden twist.

"What right have you to expect to be always amused?" she demanded.

"None; but I suppose I may mention it when I'm not," said he.

"Do you know what you remind me of? You'll be angry if I tell you."

"Then I couldn't deprive you of the pleasure of telling me, Lady Bowdon."

"You 're like a drunkard put on lemonade," she said with a vicious little laugh.

Ashley made no immediate answer; he looked at her with lifted brows; then he also laughed.

"The metaphor 's rather strong," said he, "but — if you like!"

"Well, you 're very good-tempered," she conceded with a remorseful glance. "I should feel better if you 'd hit me back."

"I 've no weapon."

"Yes, you have." Her tone was marked and significant; he looked straight and attentively in her face; her eyes were not on his watching face but on her husband whose head was bent in courteous attention to Lady Muddock's doubtfully expounded platitudes.

"Look here, do you know anything?" he asked.

"Yes," said she without turning towards him.

He grew surer of his ground and hazarded his shot with confidence.

"About a thousand pounds?"

"Yes."

"Ah, married men, married men! It wasn't his secret. And why in heaven's name did he tell you?"

"He was right to tell me. I like the truth."

"Oh, don't talk about truth! I 'm fresh from a surfeit of it. I shouldn't have thought it made you any more — " He paused, in difficulty how to say enough and not too much.

"Any happier to know?"

"Well — if you like," said Ashley, again accepting her phrase.

"No, it doesn't," she said briefly. Then she added, "I promised not to tell you; don't let him know I have."

"I 'll try to prove a better confidant than he is," said Ashley. "And why did you tell me?"

"You half guessed. I didn't tell. But — don't you think we might sympathise a little?"

"We 'll sympathise all we can," said Ashley with a laugh.

"We might almost all sympathise; she 's made a difference to almost all of us."

"Who has?"

"She — she — she," said Irene Bowdon, as she rose in answer to her hostess' signal.

"Well, yes, she has," Ashley admitted, as he drew back the chairs. And while she was still in earshot he added, "But it 's all over now."

"Indeed it isn't, it never will be," said Irene over her shoulder, as she swept away.

"How ready people are with these eternal negatives," he thought as he sat down to his glass of wine.

Then he fell to speculating why Bowdon had told her about Jack Fenning and the thousand pounds, and why she had revealed that Bowdon had told her. To him the second question seemed the more difficult to answer, but he found an explanation, partly in her desire to defend or apologise for a certain bitterness towards Ora which she had betrayed, more perhaps in the simple fact that she was brimming over with the thing and could not restrain herself in the presence of one to whom her disclosure would be so interesting and significant. She had been tempted to show him that she knew more of the situation than he supposed, and must not be treated as an outsider when Ora and her affairs came up for discussion. Anyhow there the disclosure was, with its proof that, even although the eternal negative might be rashly asserted, for the time at all events

Ora had very materially affected other lives than his own.

"Of course I never expected to be where I am; at any rate not till much later."

Bertie Jewett was talking to Bowdon about his success and his new position; he talked unaffectedly enough, although perhaps it could hardly be said that he talked modestly. Perceiving that his remark had roused Ashley to attention, he went on, "Among other things, I've got to thank your dislike of a commercial life, Mead. That let me in, you see."

"Come, Ashley," laughed Bowdon, "here's something to your credit!"

"Really the exact train of circumstances that has resulted in putting me practically at the head of the concern is rather curious to consider," pursued Bertie. Bowdon listened with a tolerant, Ashley with a malicious smile. "It all seemed to be made so easy for me. I had only to wait, and all the difficulties cleared out of the way. I can talk of it because I had nothing to do with it, except taking what I was offered, I mean."

"Well, everybody's not equal to that, by any means," said Bowdon. "But certainly fortune's treated you well."

It was on Ashley's lips to say "You owe it all to Ora Pinsent." But the thing would have been absurd and quite inadmissible to say. Perhaps it was also rather absurd to think; he knew the trick he had of magnifying and extending his own whimsical view of events until it seemed to cover the whole field. None the less, an intimate knowledge of the circumstances, of the exact train of circumstances as Bertie put it, forbade him to rob Miss Pinsent of all credit for the result on which he and Bowdon were congratulating Mr. Jewett. Why

should not poor Ora, towards whom so many people were bearing a grudge, have gratitude when she deserved it?

"The fact is," said Bowdon, tugging his moustache, "things happen very queerly in this world."

"After that startling observation, let's go into the garden and smoke," said Ashley, rising with a laugh.

In the garden Ashley talked to Lady Muddock, and had the opportunity of observing how a seventh heaven of satisfaction might be constructed without a single scrap of material which seemed to him heavenly. Such a spectacle should serve as a useful corrective for a judgment of the way of the world too personal and relative in character; it had on Ashley the perverse effect of increasing his discontent. If happiness were so easy a thing and placidity so simply come by, if nothing extraordinary were needed for them and nothing dazzling essential, why, what fools were people who went after the extraordinary and the dazzling, and yet in the end failed completely in their quest! And that you were a fool by your very nature was no comfort, but rather increased the hopelessness of the position.

"I can't help thinking how wonderfully everything has happened for the best," said Lady Muddock, her eyes resting on Alice and Bertie who were walking side by side, a few paces behind Bowdon and his wife.

"You're rather too optimistic for me," said Ashley with a laugh. "I think we do the world rough justice if we admit that most things happen for the second-best."

"We are taught —" Lady Muddock began.

"Yes, but, my dear Lady Muddock, we're most of us shocking bad pupils."

Lady Muddock made a few efforts to convert him to the creed of the best, in distinction from that of the sec-

ond-best; but Ashley would not be persuaded. The idea of the second-best gained on him. What had happened to the little circle about him was certainly not ideal, yet it was not calamity; it could hardly claim to be tragedy, yet you were in danger of being brought up short by some sudden pang if you tried to laugh at it. It wanted then a formula to express its peculiar variety, its halting midway between prosperity and misfortune, between what one would have wished and what one might have had to take. The formula of the second-best seemed to suit it very well. Even his own individual position, of which he had not taken a sanguine view, fitted itself into the formula with just a little pressing and clipping and management. His life was not ruined; he found himself left with too many interests and ambitions, with too keen an appreciation of all that was going on about him, to yield to the hysteria of such a sentimental conclusion; but it was not, and now would not be, quite what he had once dreamed and even lately hoped. He took courage and decided that he need not fall below the formula of the second-best. And what of Ora? Would she also and her life fit into the formula? She had never fitted into any formula yet; here lay her charm, the difficulty and the hopelessness of her. But then the new formula was very elastic. She might find a second-best for herself, or accept one if it were offered to her.

In the notion that he has learnt or begun to learn the ways of the world and how to take it there lies a subtle and powerful appeal to a man's vanity. There is a delicate flavour in the feeling, surpassing the more obvious delights which may be gained from the proof of intellectual superiority or the consciousness of personal charm. It is not only that the idea makes him

seem wiser than his fellows, for the conviction of greater wisdom would not appear to carry much pleasure; it makes him feel better-tempered, better-mannered, better-bred — if it may so be put, more of a gentleman. He is no longer one of the pushing jostling throng, eager to force a way into the front places, to have the best view of the show or the largest share of the presents which are to be distributed; he stands on the outskirts in cool leisureliness, smiling rather superciliously, not exactly happy, but convinced that any effort would turn his negative condition into a positive discomfort. Or the old metaphor of the banquet comes back into his mind; when the dish goes round he does not snatch at it; if it is long in coming, he feels and betrays no impatience; if it is finished before it reaches him, he waits for the next course, and meanwhile engages in polite conversation; he does not call out, nor make gestures, nor abuse the waiters (they are great folk in disguise). The rest of the company, who do all these things, commit gross breaches of taste; and although he may go home hungry he will be fed and warmed by the satisfaction of his graceful attitude and the glow of his suavity. Of course graceful attitudes are a little tiring and suavity is always more or less of a mask, but here it is that good-breeding finds its field and rewards him who displays it with its peculiar guerdon. Perhaps he would have liked the presents or the dishes, and he has not got them; but then his coat is not torn, his shirt is not crumpled, his collar is not limp. The successful betray all these unbecoming signs of a triumph in reality disgraceful; how have they the audacity to exhibit themselves red-faced, puffing, perspiring, hugging their prizes to their breasts and casting round furtive suspicious glances, fearful that they may still be robbed? Surely

the vulgarity of the means sticks to the end and soils that also?

Here were very ingenious arguments to prove that the second-best was in a true view the best; so treated and managed, the formula should surely assume new attractions?

But if a man be very hungry? The argument is not fairly put. He gets fed, though not on his favourite delicacy. But if he cannot eat rough fare? Well, in that case, so much the worse for him; he should not have a dainty stomach.

It is a long way from Kensington Palace Gardens to Charing Cross; there is time for many philosophical reflexions as a man walks from one to the other on a fine night. But at the end, when he has arrived, should his heart beat and his hand dart out eagerly at the sight of an envelope bearing an American postage stamp? Does such a paradox impugn his conclusions or merely accuse his weakness? Human nature will crop out, and hunger is hunger, however it may be caused. Perhaps these backslidings must be allowed; they come only now and then; they will not last, will at least come more seldom. The emptiness will not always vent angry abuse on the good manners which are the cause of it.

The letter was a long one, or looked long because it covered many pages — it was understamped, a circumstance prettily characteristic — but Ora wrote large, and there was not really a great deal in it. What there was was mostly about the play and the part, the flattering reception, the killing work, the unreasonableness of everybody else. All this was just Ora, Ora who was neither to be approved of, nor admired, nor imitated, but who was on no account to be changed. Ashley

read with the same smile which had shewn itself on his face when he commended the formula of the second-best to Lady Muddock's candid consideration. He came near the end. Would there be no touch of the other Ora, of his own special secret Ora, the one he knew and other people did not? There was hardly a touch; but just on the last page, just before the "yours, Ora," there came, "Oh, my dear, if only you were with me! But I seem to have got into another world. And I'm lonely, Ashley dear."

The great clock down at Westminster struck one, the hum of the town ran low, the little room was quiet. Perhaps moments like these are not the fittest for the formula of the second-best. Does it not, after all, need an audience to smile pleased and appreciative applause of it? Is it as independent, as grandly independent, as it sounds? Does it comfort a man when he is quite alone? Is it equal to fighting the contrasts between what is and what might have been?

"I seem to have got into another world. And I'm lonely, Ashley dear."

Heavens, how many worlds were there, that all his friends should be getting into others and leaving him alone in his?

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE MOST NATURAL THING

BY reason of the Government's blunders or of the Opposition's factiousness — the point awaits the decision of a candid historian in case he should deem it worth his attention — Parliament had to assemble in the autumn of this year; the Bowdons were back in town in November, the Commission met to wind up its work, and Ashley Mead was in dutiful attendance. Before this Irene had made up her mind that things were going tolerably, would go better, and in the end would turn out as well as could reasonably be expected. The recuperative effect of a vagrant autumn had produced a healthier state of feeling in her. She had begun to be less fretful about herself, less nervous and inquisitive about her husband; she had resigned herself to the course of events in a hopeful temper. Bowdon's bearing towards her was all that she could desire; it was losing that touch of exaggerated chivalry which had smacked of apology and remorse; it was assuming the air of a genuine and contented comradeship. She was inclined to think that their troubles were over. If one or two other things were over with the troubles, the principle of compensation must be accepted manfully. After all, love's alternate joy and woe is not the stuff to make a permanently happy home or the best

setting for a useful public career; on the other hand, these can co-exist with a few memories of which one does not speak and a cupboard or two kept carefully locked.

Having brought herself to this point, and feeling both praiseworthy and sensible in attaining so much, she allowed herself some astonishment at Ashley Mead, who seemed to have started in an even worse condition and yet to have achieved so much more. He appeared to have passed a complete Act of Oblivion for himself, and to have passed it with a rapidity which (from one or other of the reasons above referred to) would have been quite impossible to the Legislature. Surely in him, if in anybody, the period of convalescence should have been long? Resolution is good, so is resignation, so are common-sense and strength of will; but there is a decency in things, and to recover too quickly from a folly confirms the charge of levity and instability incurred by its original commission. Ashley should not be behaving just for all the world as though nothing had happened; such conduct was exasperating to persons who had reason to know and to feel how much really had happened. To be cheerful, to be gay, to be prospering greatly, to be dining out frequently, to have suppressed entirely all hint of emotions lately so acute and even overpowering, was not creditable to him, and cheated his friends of a singularly interesting subject for observation and comment, as well as of a sympathetic melancholy to which they had perhaps allowed themselves to look forward. It was no defence that Irene herself aimed at what he appeared to have achieved, as at a far-off ideal; she had not been, to the knowledge of all London, desperately in love with Ora Pinsent; she had not thrown up brilliant business prospects, lost an admirable match, and seriously impaired

her reputation in the eyes of all respectable people. Neither had she bribed Jack Fenning to go away at the cost of a thousand pounds.

"Surely all men aren't like that?" she cried with marked indignation.

She broke out on Ashley once when he came to tea and they chanced to be alone; he met her in a way which increased her annoyance.

"Well, what has happened after all?" he asked, leaning back in his chair and smiling at her. "I don't see that anything has. Ora has gone on a visit to America; from what I hear, a very successful visit. Presently, I suppose, she'll come back. A visit to America doesn't in these days mean a final separation from all one holds dear in the old country. I believe one almost always finds the man who lives next door in London dining at the same table in New York; then one makes his acquaintance."

"Do you ever hear from her? I never do."

"I hear from her every now and then. Oh, I admit at once what your look means; yes, not so often as at first." He laughed at the flush of vexation on Lady Bowdon's face. "I write seldomer too; I can do anything for a friend except carry on a correspondence."

"I expect every day to hear of Alice Muddock's engagement."

"Do you really think about it every day?" he asked, raising his brows. "What an eye you keep on your acquaintances!"

Was he genuine? Or was he only perfectly, coolly, securely on his guard? Irene felt baffled and puzzled; but it was bad enough that he should be able even to pretend so well to her; pretending that nothing had happened was not always easy.

"Do you think Ora will come back?" she asked. "If she's successful she may stay."

"Oh, she'll come," he nodded. "We shall have her back in Chelsea before six months are out."

"And when she does?"

Irene's curiosity had overcome her, but Ashley laughed again as he answered, "Ascribe what emotions you like to me, Lady Bowdon; but I haven't heard that Jack Fenning's health's failing."

There was some pretence about the attitude so puzzling and exasperating to Irene Bowdon, but more of reality. The passing of the months had brought a sense of remoteness; it was intensified by a gradual cessation of the interchange of letters. Ora had told him that she seemed to have got into another world and was lonely; she was, without doubt, still in another world; whether still lonely he could not tell. She was in all senses a long way off; what he had chosen, or at least accepted as the lesser evil, was happening; she and her life were diverging from him and his life. He recognised all this very clearly as he ate his chop at the club that evening. She had found him living one life; she had given him another while she was with him; she left him a third different from either of the other two. That evening, whether from some mood of his own or because of what Irene had said, she seemed irrevocably departed and separated from him. But even in that hour she was to come back to him so as to be very near in feeling though still across the seas in fact.

As he turned into his street about ten o'clock and approached the door of his house, he perceived a man walking slowly up and down, to and fro. There was something familiar in the figure and the gait; an indecision, a looseness, a plaintive weakness. Uncon-

sciously Ashley quickened his step; he had a conviction which seemed absurd and was against all probability; a moment would prove or disprove its truth. The man came under the gas lamp, stopped, and looked up at Ashley's windows. His face was plain to see now. "By God, it is!" whispered Ashley Mead, with a frown and a smile. A little more slinking, a little more slouching, a little more altogether destitute of the air which should mark a self-respecting man, but unchanged save for these intensifications of his old characteristics, Jack Fenning stood and looked up at the house whence he had once come out richer by a thousand pounds than when he went in. He seemed to regard the dingy old walls with a maudlin affection.

It was a pretty bit of irony that she should come back in this way; that this aspect of her, this side of her life, should be thrust before Ashley's eyes when all that he loved of her and longed for was so far away. Ashley walked up to Jack Fenning with lips set firm in a stiff smile.

"Well, Mr. Fenning, what brings you here?" he asked. "I've no more thousands about me, you know."

"I—I thought you might give me a drink for old friendship," said Jack. "They said you were out, and wouldn't let me sit in your room. So I said I'd come back; but I've been waiting all the time."

"If you don't mind what the drink's for, I'll give it you. Come along." He loathed the man, but because the man in a sense belonged to Ora he would not turn him away; curiosity, too, urged him to find out the meaning of an appearance so unexpected. With Ora in America, how could it profit Jack to make a nuisance

of himself in England? There was nothing to be got by that.

When they were upstairs and Jack had been provided with the evidence of friendship which he desired, Ashley lit his pipe, sat down by the fire, and studied his companion in silence for a few moments. Jack grew a little uncomfortable under the scrutiny; he was quite aware that he did not and could not stand investigation. But Ashley was thinking less of him than of what he represented. He had been just one of those stupid wanton obstacles, in themselves so unimportant, which serve to wreck fair schemes; he seemed to embody the perversity of things, and to make mean and sordid the fate that he typified.

"What do you want?" Ashley asked suddenly and abruptly. "I've got no more money for you, you know."

No doubt Jack was accustomed to this style of reception. It did not prevent him from telling his story. He lugged out a cheap broken-backed cigar from his breast-pocket and lit it; it increased the feeble disreputableness of his appearance.

"I'll tell you all about it, Mr. Mead," he said. "It may be worth your while to listen." But the sudden confidence of these last words died away quickly. "I hope to God you'll do something for me!" he ended in a whining voice.

This man was Ora Pinsent's husband.

"Go on," muttered Ashley, his teeth set hard on the stem of his pipe.

The story began, but proceeded very haltingly; Ashley had to draw it out by questions. The chief point of obscurity was as regards Jack's own intentions and motives. Why he had come to England remained in

vagueness; Ashley concluded that the memory of the thousand pounds had drawn him with a subtle retrospective attraction, although reason must have told him that no second thousand would come. But on the matter of his grievances and the sad treatment he had suffered from others Jack was more eloquent and more lucid. Everybody was against him, even his wife Ora Pinsent, even his own familiar friend Miss Daisy Macpherson. For Miss Macpherson had deserted him, had gone over to the enemy, had turned him out, and for lucre's sake had given information to hostile emissaries. And his wife ("My own wife, Mr. Mead," said Jack mournfully) was trying to get rid of him for good and all.

Ashley suddenly sat up straight in his seat as the narrative reached this point.

"To get rid of you? What do you mean?" he asked.

"There's a fellow named Flint —" said Jack between gulps at his liquor.

Of course there was! A fellow who did not despise nosings! That bygone talk with Babba leapt lifelike to Ashley's mind.

The fellow named Flint, aided by the basest treachery on the part of Miss Macpherson — why had she not denied all compromising facts? — had landed Mr. Fenning in his present predicament.

"What in the world is it you mean?" groaned Ashley.

"They've begun divorce proceedings," said Jack, with a desperate pull at the broken-backed leaky cigar. "My own wife, Mr. Mead."

"Upon my soul, you're a much-wronged man," said Ashley.

In the next few moments he came near to repenting his sarcastic words. Repentance would indeed have

been absurd; but if every one were kicking the creature it was hard and needless to add another kick. He found some sorrow and disapprobation for the conduct of Miss Daisy Macpherson; it was ungrateful in her who had liked to be known as Mrs. Foster in private life.

"Babba Flint got round your friend, did he?" he asked. "Well, I suppose you've no defence?"

"I've got no money, Mr. Mead."

"That's the same thing, you know," said Ashley. "Well, what's the matter? How does it hurt you to be divorced?"

"I never tried to divorce her," moaned Jack.

"Never mind your conduct to your wife; we can leave that out."

"I was very fond of Miss Pinsent; but she was hard to me."

"I've nothing to do with all that. What do you want to resist the divorce for?" His tone was savage; how dare this creature tell him that he had been very fond of Ora Pinsent? Must her memory be still more defiled? Should he always have to think of this man when he thought of her? Jack shrank lower and lower in his chair under the flash of severity; his words died away into confused mutterings; he stretched out his hand towards the whiskey bottle.

"You're half drunk already," said Ashley. Jack looked at him for an instant with hazy eyes, and then poured out some liquor; Ashley shrugged his shoulders; his suggested reason had, he perceived, no validity. Jack drank his draught and leant forward towards his entertainer with a fresh flicker of boldness.

"I know what their game is, Mr. Mead," he said. "Daisy let it all out when we had our row."

"Whose game?"

"Why, Ora's, and that damned Flint's, and Hazlewood's."

"Will you oblige me in one point? If you will, you may have some more whiskey. Tell the story without mentioning Miss Pinsent."

Jack smiled in wavering bewilderment. Why shouldn't he mention Ora? He took refuge in an indeterminate "They," which might or might not include his wife.

"They mean to get rid of me, then their way 's clear," he said with a nod.

"Their way to what?"

"To marrying her to Hazlewood," said Jack with a cunning smile. He waited an instant; his smile grew a little broader; he took another gulp. "What do you say to that, Mr. Mead?" he asked.

Several moments passed, Jack still wearing his cunning foolish smile, Ashley smoking steadily. What did he say to that? Babba had offered him the service of nosings; would he not, in an equally liberal spirit, put them at the disposal of Mr. Hazlewood? Hazlewood was a good fellow, but he would not be squeamish about the nosings. So far there was no improbability. But Ora? Was she party to the scheme? Well, she would gladly — great heavens, how gladly! — be rid of this creature; and the other thing would be held in reserve; it would not be pressed on her too soon. The same mixture of truth and pretence which had marked his talk with Irene Bowdon displayed itself in his answer to Jack Fenning.

"The most natural thing in the world," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Jack's face fell, disappointment and dismay were painted on it. His next remark threw some light on the hopes which had brought him to England.

"I thought you'd be obliged to me for the tip," he said mournfully.

Tips and nosings — nosings and tips!

"Good God, have you any notion at all of the sort of creature you are?" asked Ashley.

Jack giggled uncomfortably. "We're none of us perfect," he said. "I don't see that I'm worse than other people." He paused, and added again, "I thought you'd be obliged to me, Mr. Mead."

Ashley had fallen to thinking; now he asked one question.

"Does Miss Pinsent know you came here before?"

"Daisy gave away the whole thing," murmured Jack forlornly. "All about my being here and what you did; and Hazlewood saw me here, you know." He paused again, and resumed, "It's all pretty rough on me; I don't want to be troublesome, but they ought to do something for me."

"And they wouldn't, so you came to me?"

Jack wriggled about and finished his glass.

"Well, I won't, either," said Ashley.

"I've only got thirty shillings. There's a cousin of mine in Newcastle who might do something for me if I had a bit of money, but—"

"What have you done with the thousand?"

"Daisy clawed the lot," moaned Mr. Fenning.

It was surely a delusion which made Ashley feel any responsibility for the man; he had no doubt prevented Jack from rejoining his wife, but no good could have come of the reunion. Nevertheless, on the off-chance of there being a moral debt due, he went to the drawer of his writing-table and took out two bank-notes. It occurred to him that the proceeding was unfair to the cousin in Newcastle, but in this world somebody must suffer. He

held out the notes to Jack. "Go," he said. Jack's eyes glistened as he darted out his hand. "Never come back. By heaven, I'll throw you downstairs if you ever come back."

Jack laughed weakly as he looked at the notes and thrust them into his pocket. He rose; he could still stand pretty steadily. "You understand? Never come back or — the stairs!" said Ashley, standing opposite to him and smiling at him.

"I won't trouble you again, Mr. Mead," Jack assured him.

"It 's a case where the trouble would be a pleasure, but don't come all the same. You 'd be a poor sort of man to be hanged for, you know."

Jack laughed more comfortably; he thought that he was establishing pleasant relations; but he was suddenly relegated to fright and dismay, for Ashley caught him by the shoulder and marched him quickly to the door, saying, "Now, get out." Jack glanced round in his face. "All right, I 'm going, I 'm going, Mr. Mead," he muttered. "Don't be angry, I 'm going." He darted hastily through the door and stood for one instant at the top of the stairs, looking back over his shoulder with a scared expression. Ashley burst into a laugh and slammed the door; the next moment he heard Jack's shuffling steps going down.

"I must have looked quite melodramatic," he said as he flung himself down on his sofa. His heart was beating quick and the sweat stood on his brow. "Good God, what an ass I am!" he thought. "But I only just kept my hands off the fellow. How infernally absurd!" He got up again, relit his pipe, and mixed himself some whiskey-and-water. His self-respect demanded an immediate and resolute return to the plane

of civilised life; an instinct to throw Jack Fenning downstairs, combined with a lively hope that his neck would be broken, was not civilised.

And was it grateful? His stiff smile came again as he declared that he ought to consider himself obliged to Jack and that the bank-notes were no more than a proper acknowledgment of services rendered. Jack's reappearance and Jack's news gave the fitting and necessary cap to the situation; they supplied its demands and filled up its deficiencies, they forbade any foolish attempt to idealise it, or to shut eyes to it, or to kick against the pricks. He had elected to have nothing to do with nosings; then he could not look to enjoy the fruits of nosing. The truth went deeper than that; he had been right in his calm bitter declaration that the thing of which Jack came to warn him was the most natural thing in the world. Ora, being in another world and being lonely, turned to the companionship her new world gave; like sought like. The thing, while remaining a little difficult to imagine — because alien memories crossed the mirror and blurred the image — became more and more easy to explain on the lines of logic, and to justify out of his knowledge of the world, of women and of men. It was natural, indeed he caught the word "inevitable" on the tip of his tongue. The whole affair, the entire course of events since Ora Pinsent had come on the scene, was of a piece; the same laws ruled, the same tendencies asserted themselves; against their sway and their force mere inclinations, fancies, emotions, passions — call them what you would — seemed very weak and transient, stealing their moment of noisy play, but soon shrinking away beaten before the steady permanent strength of these opponents. The problem worked out to its answer, the pieces fitted into the puz-

zle, until the whole scheme became plain. As Bowdon to his suitable wife, as Alice Muddock to her obvious husband, so now Ora Pinsent to the man who was so much in her life, so much with her, whose lines ran beside her lines, converging steadily to a certain point of meeting. Yes, so Ora Pinsent to Sidney Hazlewood. It would be so; memories of days in the country, of inn parlours, of sweet companionship, could not hinder the end; the laws and tendencies would have their way. The sheep had tried to make a rush, to escape to pleasant new browsing-grounds, the dog was on them in an instant and barked them back to their proper pens again.

"Only I don't seem to have a pen," said Ashley Mead.

When a thing certainly is, it is perhaps waste of time to think whether it is for the best, and what there may be to be said for and against it. But the human mind is obstinately plagued with a desire to understand and appreciate things; it likes to feel justified in taking up an amiable and acquiescent attitude towards the world in which it finds itself, it does not love to live in rebellion nor even in a sullen obedience. Therefore Ashley tried to vindicate the ways of fate and to declare that the scheme which was working itself out was very good. Even for himself probably a pen would be indicated presently, and he would walk into it. On a broader view the pen-system seemed to answer very well and to produce the sort of moderate happiness for which moderately sensible beings might reasonably look. That was the proper point of view from which to regard the matter; anything else led to an uncivilised desire to throw Jack Fenning downstairs.

Thus Jack Fenning vanished, but in the next day

or two there came the letter from Ora, the letter which was bound to come in view of the new things she had learnt. Ora was not exactly angry, but she was evidently puzzled. She gave him thanks for keeping Jack away from her, out of her sight and her knowledge. "But," she wrote, "I don't understand about afterwards; because you found out from Mr. Hazlewood things that might have made, oh, all the difference, if you 'd told them to me and if you 'd wanted them to. I don't understand why you didn't tell me; we could have done what 's being done now and I should have got free. Didn't you want me free? I can't and won't think that you didn't really love me, that you wouldn't really have liked to have me for your own. But I don't know what else I can think. It does look like it. I wish I could see you, Ashley, because I think I might perhaps understand then why you acted as you did; I 'm sure you had a reason, but I can't see what it was. When we were together, I used to know how you thought and felt about things, and so perhaps, if we were together now, you could make me understand why you treated me like this. But we 're such a long way off from one another. Do you remember saying that I should begin to come back as soon as ever I went away, and that every day would bring me nearer to you again? It isn't like that; you get farther away. It 's not only that I 'm not with you now, but somehow it comes to seem as if I 'd never been with you — not as we really were, so much together. And so I don't know any more how you feel, and I can't understand how you did nothing after what you found out from Mr. Hazlewood. Because it really would have made all the difference. I don't want to reproach you, but I just don't understand. I shall be travelling about

a lot in the next few weeks and shan't have time to write many letters. Good-bye."

It was what she must think, less by far than she might seem to have excuse for saying. He had no answer to it, no answer that he could send to her, no answer that he could carry to her, without adding a sense of hurt to the bewilderment that she felt. Of course too she forgot how large a share the play and the part, with all they stood for, had had in the separation and distance between them which she deplored as so sore a barrier to understanding. She saw only that there had been means by which Jack Fenning might have been cleared out of the way, means by which he was in fact now being cleared out of the way, and that Ashley had chosen to conceal them from her and not to use them himself. Hence her puzzled pain, and her feeling that she had lost her hold on him and her knowledge of his mind. Reading the letter, he could not stifle some wonder that her failure to understand was so complete. He would not be disloyal to her; anything that was against her was wrung from him reluctantly. But had she no shrinking from what was being done, no repugnance at it, no sense that she was soiled and a sordid tinge given to her life? No, she had none of these things; she wanted to be free; he could have freed her and would not; now Sidney Hazlewood and Babba Flint were setting her at liberty. He was far off, they were near; he was puzzling, their conduct was intelligible. She felt herself growing more and more separated from him; was she not growing nearer and nearer to them? The law ruled and the tendency worked through such incidents as these; in them they sprang to light and were fully revealed, their underlying strength became momentarily open and manifest. They

would go on ruling and working, using the puzzle, the wound, the resentment, the separation, the ever-growing distance, the impossibility of understanding. These things blotted out memories, so that his very face would grow blurred for her, the tones of his voice dim and strange, the touch of his lips alien and forgotten. She would be travelling a lot in the next few weeks and would not have time to write many letters. He knew, as he read, that she would write no more letters at all, that this was the last to come from her to him, the last that would recall the intimate and sweet companionship whose ending it deplored with poor pathetic bewilderment. She did not see how they came to be so far apart and to be drifting farther and farther apart; she saw only the fact. Was it any easier for him to bear because he seemed to see the reason and the necessity?

So, "Good-bye," she ended; and it was the end.

He put the letter away in the drawer whence he had taken the bank-notes for Jack Fenning, drew a chair up to the table and, sitting down, untied the red tape round a brief which lay there. He began to read but broke off when he had read a few lines and sat for a moment or two, looking straight in front of him.

"Yes," he said, "there's an end of that." And he went on with the brief. It was indeed the most natural thing in the world.

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CHAPTER XXIV

"A GOOD SIGHT"

"ONE unbroken round of triumph from the hour we landed to the hour we left," said Babba Flint. He was off duty, had dined well, and come on to Mrs. Pocklington's rather late; although perfectly master of himself, he was not inclined at this moment to think less well of the world than it deserved.

"Including the legal proceedings?" asked Irene Bowdon, studying the figure on her French fan.

"Well, we put them through all right; pretty sharp too." Babba looked at his companion with a droll air. "Fact is," he continued, "some of us thought it as well to fix the thing while we were on the other side; complications might have arisen here, you know."

"Oh, I know what you mean. It's her own look-out; I daresay Mr. Hazlewood will make a very good husband."

"He won't make much difference except in business matters," observed Babba composedly. "We all know that well enough." Babba did not seem to deplore the state of affairs he indicated.

"Does he — the man himself?" Her curiosity was natural enough.

"Lord love you, yes, Lady Bowdon. It's not like the other affair, you see. That wasn't business; this

is." He eyed Irene's face, which was rather troubled. "Best thing, after all," he added.

"I suppose so," said Irene, looking up with a faint smile.

"Oh, mind you, I 'm sorry in a way. But if you won't pay the price, you don't acquire the article, that 's all. I did it for Hazlewood, I 'd have done it for Mead. But if you don't like being in large letters in the bills and the headlines, and being cross-examined yourself, and having her cross-examined, and having everybody —"

"In short, if you don't like going through the mud —"

"You 've got to stay on the near side of the ditch. Precisely."

Irene sighed. Babba fixed his eye-glass and took a view of the room.

"I 'm not Mead's sort," he continued, his eye roving round the while, "but I know how it struck him. Well, it didn't strike Sidney that way and I suppose it didn't strike her. Therefore —" He broke off, conceiving that his meaning was clear enough. "She 's coming here to-night," he went on a moment later.

"And he 's here."

"Situation!" murmured Babba, spreading his hands out.

"Oh dear no," said Irene scornfully. "We don't go in for situations in society, Mr. Flint. Isn't that Alice Muddock over there?"

"It is; and Jewett with her. Still no situation?" He smiled and twisted the glass more firmly in his eye. As he spoke Ashley Mead came up to Alice and Bertie, shook hands with both, talked to them for a moment and then passed on, leaving them alone together. Alice

looked after him for an instant with a faint smile and then turned her face towards her companion again.

"Your husband here?" asked Babba of Lady Bowdon.

"Yes, my husband's here," answered Irene. She nearly said, "My husband's here too," but such emphatic strokes were not needed to define a situation to Babba's professional eye. "He's somewhere in the crowd," she added.

"That's all right," said Babba, whether mirthfully or merely cheerfully Irene could not determine. Her next question seemed to rise to her lips inevitably:

"And what's become of Mr. Fenning?"

"Nobody knows and nobody cares," said Babba. "He doesn't count any longer, you see, Lady Bowdon. We've marked Jack Fenning off. Bless you, I believe Miss Pinsent's forgotten he ever existed!"

"She seems good at forgetting."

"What? Oh, yes, uncommon," agreed Babba rather absently; a pretty girl had chanced to pass by at the minute.

Irene was inclined to laugh. With all his eye for the situation Babba reduced it to absolutely nothing but a situation, a group, a *tableau*, a pose of figures at which you stopped to look for a moment and passed on, saying that it was very effective, that it carried such and such an impression, and would hold the house for this or that number of seconds. It was no use for life to ask Babba to take it with the tragic seriousness which Irene had at her disposal.

"I wonder if she'll have forgotten me," she said.

"She always remembers when she sees you again," Babba assured her.

"Ought that to be a comfort to me?"

"Well, it would be good enough for me," said Babba, and he began to hum a tune softly. "After a year, you know, it's something," he broke off to add.

"Have you really been away a year?"

"Every hour of it, without including the time I was seasick," said Babba with a retrospective shudder. "Ah, here she comes!" he went on, and explained the satisfaction which rang in his tones by saying, "I see her most days, but she's always a good sight, you know."

As Irene watched Ora Pinsent pass up the room responding gaily to a hundred greetings, it occurred to her that Babba's was perhaps the truest point of view from which to regard her old acquaintance, her friend and enemy. In personal intercourse Ora might be unsatisfactory; perhaps it was not well to let her become too much to you; it was no doubt imprudent to rely on becoming or remaining very much to her. But considered as a "good sight," as an embellishment of the room she was in, of the society that knew and the world that held her, as an increase of beauty on the earth, as a fountain of gaiety, both as a mirror to picture and as a magnet to draw forth fine emotions and great passions, she seemed to justify herself. This was not to call her "nice" in Lady Muddock's sense; but it was really the way to take her, the only way in which she would fit into Irene's conception of an ordered universe. Ashley Mead had not, it seemed, been content to take her like that. Was the man who walked a few yards behind her, with his tired smile and his deep wrinkle, his carefully arranged effective hair, and his fifty years under decent control — was her new husband content to take her like that and to accept for himself the accidental character which she had the knack of imparting to her domestic relations? He was more respectable and more present-

able than Jack Fenning. Jack Fenning counted for nothing now; in truth did Mr. Hazlewood count for much more? Except, of course, as Babba had observed, in business matters.

Irene looked up with a little start; there had been a movement by her; she found Babba Flint gone and Ashley Mead in his place. His eyes left Ora and turned to her.

"Splendid, isn't she?" he said in a spontaneous unintended outburst.

"Yes; but —" Irene's fan moved almost imperceptibly, but its point was now towards Sidney Hazlewood. "Would you like it?" she asked in a half-whisper.

Ashley made no answer; his regard was fixed on Ora Pinsent. Ora was in conversation and did not perceive the pair who watched her so attentively. They heard her laugh; her face was upturned to the man she talked to in the old way, with its old suggestion of expecting to be kissed. Sidney Hazlewood had disappeared into the throng; yes, he seemed decidedly accidental, as accidental as Jack Fenning himself.

"There's my husband," said Irene, as Bowdon appeared from among the crowd and went up to Ora.

After a moment he pointed to where they were, and he and Ora came towards them together.

"Prepare to receive cavalry," said Irene with a nervous little laugh; the next instant her hands were caught in Ora's outstretched grasp. "What an age since I've seen you!" Ora cried, and kissed her very affectionately. She remembered Irene when she saw her again, as Babba had foretold.

The two women talked, the two men stood by and listened. Ora's greeting to Ashley had been friendly but quite ordinary; she did not say that it was an age

since she had seen him, but met him as though they had parted yesterday. The situation seemed to fade away; the sense that after all nothing had happened recurred to Irene's mind. Sidney Hazlewood instead of Jack Fenning — that was all! But a passing glance at Ashley's face changed her mood; the smile with which he regarded Ora was not the smile he used to have for her. He was admiring still (how should he not?), but now he was analysing also; he was looking at her from the outside; he was no longer absorbed in her.

"Oh, my trip all seems like a dream," said Ora. "A lovely dream! You must come and see the piece when we play it here."

They all declared that they would come and see the play; it and it alone seemed to represent her trip to Ora's mind; the legal proceedings and Mr. Hazlewood were not thought of.

"I had lots of fun and no trouble," said Ora.

Ashley Mead gave a sudden short laugh. It made Irene start and she fell to fingering her fan in some embarrassment; Bowdon's smile also was uncomfortable. Ora looked at Ashley with an air of surprise.

"He's laughing at me for something," she said to Irene. "I don't know what. Will you tell me if I come down to supper with you, Ashley?"

She still called him Ashley; Irene was definitely displeased; she thought the use of his first name decidedly unseemly under the circumstances.

"I'll try," said Ashley. Ora took his arm and waved a gay adieu. "Come and see me very soon," she called, and, as she turned away, she shot a glance at Bowdon. "You come too; you haven't been for — " She paused and ended with a laugh. "Well, for almost longer than I can remember."

The supper-room was not very full; they got a little table to themselves and sat down. It was away in a corner: they were in effect alone.

"What were you laughing at? Me?"

"Yes, of course," answered Ashley.

She looked at him with a rather distrustful and inquisitive glance.

"How funnily everything has turned out," she began rather timidly. It was just as he had expected her to begin.

"Funnily? Oh, I don't see that. I call it all very natural," he said.

"Natural!" Ora repeated, lifting her brows. Ashley nodded, and drank some champagne.

Ora seemed disappointed to find him taking that view. The expression of her face set him smiling again.

"I don't think I like you to laugh," she said. "It seems rather unkind, I think."

He raised his eyes to hers suddenly. "Then I won't laugh," he said, in a lower tone. "But I wasn't laughing in that way at all, really." He had, at all events, grown grave now; he pushed his chair a little back and leant his elbow on the table, resting his head on his hand.

"If I told you all about how it happened—" she began.

"Your letter told me," he interrupted. "I don't want you to tell me again."

Her eyes grew affectionate. She laid a hand on his arm.

"Was it hard, dear Ashley?" she whispered.

"I knew how it would be from the moment you went away," was his answer.

"Then why did you let me go?" she asked quickly, and, as he fancied, rather reproachfully. She seemed to snatch at a chance of excusing herself.

"You wanted to go."

Ora looked a little troubled; she knit her brows and clasped her hands; she seemed to be turning what he said over in her mind. She did not deny its truth, but its truth distressed her vaguely.

"It's no use bothering ourselves trying to explain things," Ashley went on more lightly. "It's all over now, anyhow." He was conscious of the old weakness — he could not cause her pain. His impulse even now was to make her think that she had been in all things right.

"Yes." Her dark eyes rested on his face a moment. "You liked it while it lasted?"

"Very much," he admitted, smiling again for a moment. "But it's over. I'm sorry it's over, you know."

"Are you, Ashley? Really sorry?" He nodded. "So am I," she said with a sigh.

He rose to his feet and she followed his example; but she would not let him take her back to where the people were, but made him sit down in a recess in the passage outside the drawing-room. She seemed to have fallen into a pensive mood; he was content to sit by her in silence until she spoke again.

"Sidney was very kind, and very helpful to me," she said at last. "I got to like him very much." She was pleading with Ashley in her praise of Hazlewood.

"Oh, yes, I know," he murmured. "Good heavens, you don't think I'm blaming you?"

He had said that to her before; she did not accept it so readily now.

"Yes, you are," she said, with a little temper.

'You 've set me down for something — as some sort of person. I know you have. You may say that 's not blaming, but it 's just as bad."

He was surprised at her penetration.

"I suppose you always felt like that really, down in your heart," she added thoughtfully. "But you used to like me."

"I should rather think I did," said Ashley.

"You don't now?"

"Yes, I do."

"Not so much? Not in the same way?" A touch of urgency had come into her tone.

"Should you expect that? And I 'm sure you wouldn't wish it."

"Some people go on caring always — whatever happens."

He leant forward towards her and spoke in a low serious voice.

"I shall never be able to think of my life without thinking of you," he told her. After a pause he added, "That 's the truth of it, but I don't know exactly how much it comes to. A good deal, I expect; more than generally happens in such cases."

"You 'll marry somebody!" The prospect did not seem to please her.

"Very likely," he answered. "What difference does that make? Whatever happens, you 're there. You put yourself there, and you can't take yourself away again."

"I don't want to," said Ora, with all her old sincerity in the avowal of her feelings.

"Of course you don't," he said, with a faint smile. She had spoken seriously, almost pathetically, as though she were asking to be allowed to stay with him in some

such way as he had hinted at; for the first time he recognised the look of appeal once so familiar. It brought to him mingled pain and pleasure; it roused a tenderness which made him anxious above all to say nothing that would hurt her, and to leave her happy and content with herself when they parted; this also was quite in the old fashion.

"Why, you'll stand for the best time and the best thing in my life," he said. "You'll be my holiday, Ora. But we can't have holidays all the time."

"We had some lovely days together, hadn't we? I'm not sure the first wasn't best of all. You remember?"

"Oh, yes, I remember."

"You're laughing again." But now Ora laughed a little herself. The cloud was passing away; she was regaining the serenity of which too much self-examination had threatened to rob her, and the view of herself as the passive subject of occurrences at which she, in common with the rest of the world, was at liberty to sigh or smile in a detached irresponsibility.

A man passed by and bowed, saying, "How do you do, Mrs. Hazlewood?"

"Isn't that funny?" asked Ora. "Nobody thinks of calling me Mrs. Hazlewood."

"I certainly shan't think of calling you anything of the kind," said Ashley.

She laughed, seemed to hesitate a little, but then risked her shot.

"You wouldn't have expected me to be called Mrs. Mead, would you?" she asked.

"No, I shouldn't," he answered with a smile. The whole case seemed to be stated in her question. She not only would not have been called, but she would not really have been, Mrs. Mead — not in any sense which

was of true importance. Neither had she been Mrs. Fenning; neither was she Mrs. Hazlewood; she was and would remain Ora Pinsent.

"Of course I don't mind it," Ora went on, with a smile whose graciousness was for both her actual husband in the drawing-room and her hypothetical husband in the recess. "But somehow it always sounds odd." She laughed, adding, "I suppose some people would call that odd — your friend Alice Muddock, for instance."

"I haven't the least doubt that Alice Muddock would call it very odd."

"She never liked me really, you know."

"Well, perhaps she didn't."

"But she did like you, Ashley."

"She certainly doesn't," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh, you 'd never have got on with her," said Ora scornfully. Then she jumped up suddenly, crying, "There 's Babba, I want to speak to him." But before she went, she said one word more. "You were the truest finest friend, Ashley. And I wasn't worthy." She looked at him in appeal. "No, not worthy," she repeated. "I think Alice Muddock 's right about me." She threw out her hands in the saddest little protest, dumbly accusing the Power that had made her what she was. "I think you could still break my heart by being unhappy," said Ashley Mead. She gave him a little wistful smile, shook her head, and walked quickly away. Her voice rose gaily the next moment, crying, "Babba, Babba!" And that was all Babba's situation came to.

There was in fact no situation; there was only a state of things; so Ashley decided as he sat on alone. Perhaps rather a strange state of things, but certainly no more than that. Her being here in town, liable to be

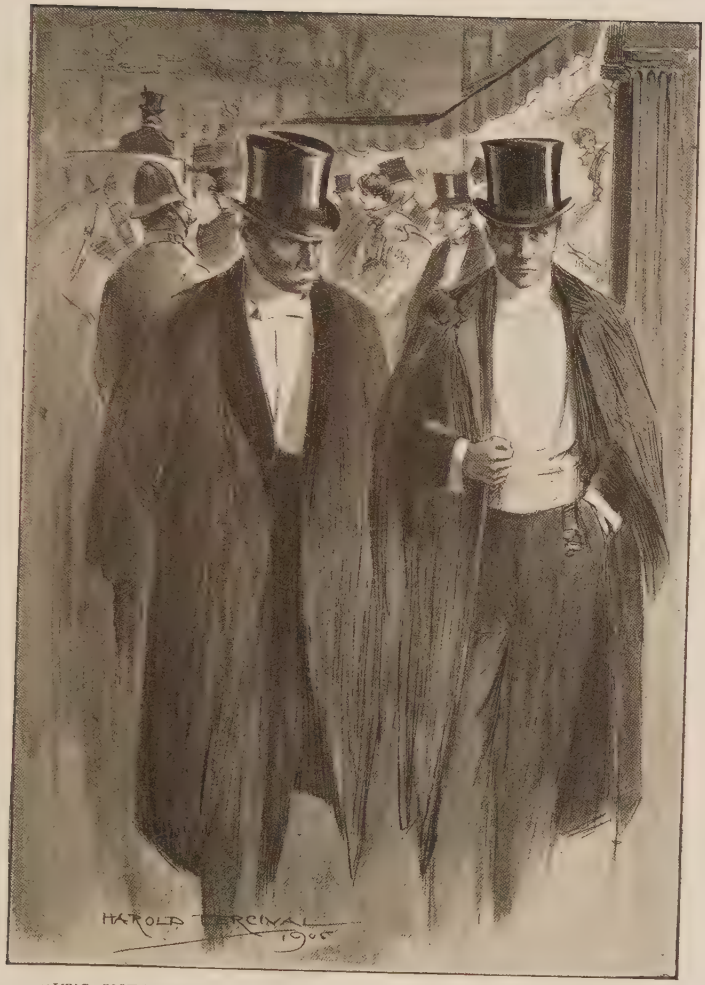
met, having to be spoken to, being again a presence as well as a memory — all this made his position different from what it had been while she was over seas. But stranger still was the knowledge that, however often she were met and spoken to, the presence would be and would rest different from the memory. He had recognised the possibility that all which had come to him in the months of separation would vanish again at her living touch and that the old feelings would revive in their imperious exclusive sway. He had known that this might happen; he had not known whether he hoped or feared its happening; because, if it happened, there was no telling what else might happen. Now he became aware that it would not happen, and (perhaps this was strangest of all) that the insuperable obstacle came from himself and not from her. She had not ceased, and could not cease, to attract, amuse, and charm, or even to be the woman with whom out of all women he would best like to be. But here the power of her presence stopped; it owned limits; it had not a boundless empire; that belonged now only to the memory of her. It was then the memory, not the presence, which he would always think of when he thought of his life, which would be the great thing to him, which would abide always with him, unchanged, unweakened, unspoilt either by what she was now or in the future might be. She was beyond her own power; herself, as she had been to him, she could neither efface nor mar. He had idealised her; he was rich in the possession of the image his idealising had made; but the woman before his eyes was different or seen with different eyes. As this came home to his mind, a sense of relief rose for a moment in him; he hailed its appearance with eagerness; but its appearance was brief; it was drowned in a sense of

loss. He was free; that was the undoubted meaning of what he felt; but he was free at a great cost. It was as though a man got rid of his fetters by cutting off the limb that carried them.

He strolled back into the drawing-room. The throng had grown thin. Alice Muddock and Bertie Jewett were gone; Alice had kept out of Ora's way. Babba Flint was just saying good-bye; the Bowdons, Ora, and Hazlewood were standing in a group together in the middle of the room. He noticed that Hazlewood shifted his position a little so as to present a fullback view. Really Hazlewood need not feel uncomfortable. Hazlewood as an individual was of such very small importance. However Ashley did not thrust his presence on him, but went off and talked for a few moments with his hostess. Meanwhile the group separated; Ora came towards Mrs. Pocklington, Hazlewood following. Ashley hastily said his own farewell and sauntered off; Ora waved her hand to him with her lavish freedom and airy grace of gesture, calling, "Good-night, Ashley!" Hazlewood exchanged a nod with him; then the pair passed out.

In the hall Bowdon suggested that they should walk a little way together, the night being fine. Irene knew well why they wanted to walk together, but got into her carriage without objection; she had no more to fear from Ora. As for Ashley, so for her Ora's work lay in the past, not in the present or the future. The difference in her life, as in his, had been made once and for all; nothing that came now could either increase it or take it away. Her fears, her jealousy, her grudge, were for the memory, not for the presence.

The two men who had wanted to talk to one another walked in silence, side by side. But presently the



"IT'S INFERNALLY IMPERTINENT OF ME, BUT, I SAY, ASHLEY, ARE YOU STILL IN LOVE WITH HER?"—*Page 361.*

silence seemed absurd, and they spoke of trivial matters. Then came silence again.

"I mustn't come much further," said Bowdon at last, "or I shan't get home to-night."

"Oh, come on a little way; it'll do you good," said Ashley.

So they went on a little way. And at last Bowdon spoke.

"She doesn't look a day older," he said.

"Oh, no. She won't look a day older for ever so long."

"And old Hazlewood 's just the same, wrinkle and all."

"She won't smooth that away," said Ashley with a laugh.

Bowdon took his arm and they walked on together for a little way further. Then Bowdon stopped.

"I'm going home," he said, dropping Ashley's arm. "Good-night."

"Good-night," Ashley answered.

But for a moment Bowdon did not go. With a smile at once confidential and apologetic he put the question which was in his mind: "It 's infernally impertinent of me, but, I say, Ashley, are you still in love with her?"

Ashley looked him full in the face for a moment, and then gave his answer. "No, I'm not, but I wish to God I was!" he said.

For in that love his life had done its uttermost; it would do no such good thing again. He had called Ora's time his holiday time. It was over. The rare quality of its pleasure he would taste no more. Bowdon nodded in understanding. "A wonderful creature!" he said, as he turned away.

A wonderful creature! Or, as Babba Flint had pre-

ferred to put it, "A good sight." Yes, that must be the way to look at her, the right way to look at her existence, the truth about it. Only when Ashley remembered that little gesture of dumb protest, the truth seemed rather hard — and hard not for himself alone. If she sacrificed others, if her nature were shaped to that, was she not a sacrifice herself — sacrificed that beautiful things might be set before the eyes and in the hearts of men? Let judgment then be gentle, and love unashamed.